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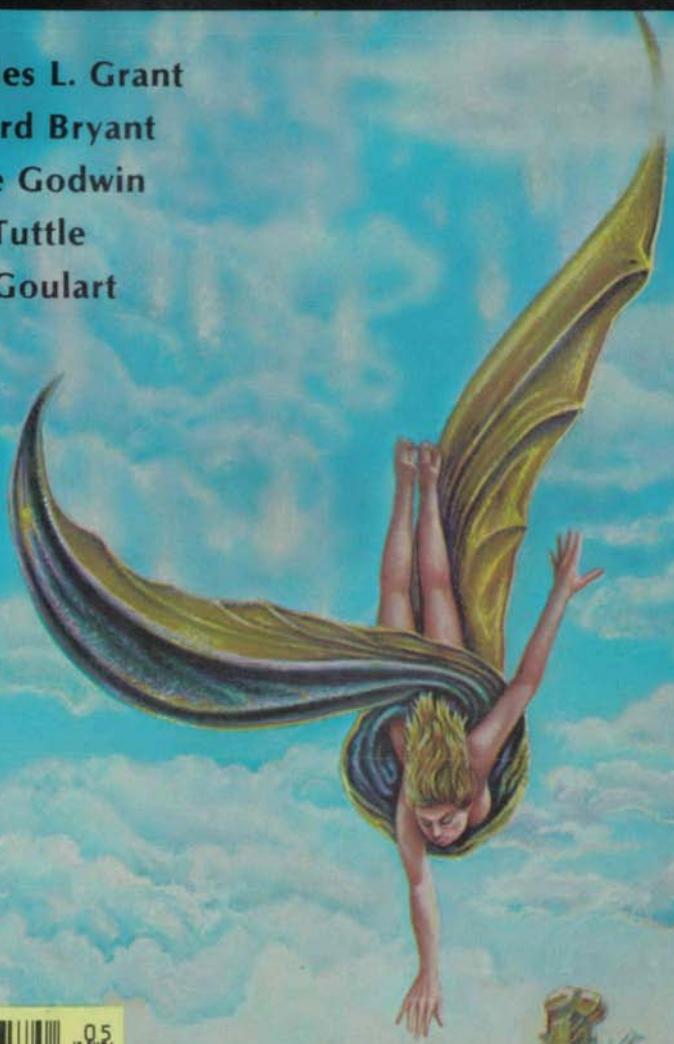
THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

MAY

Charles L. Grant
Edward Bryant
Parke Godwin
Lisa Tuttle
Ron Goulart



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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

MAY • 32nd Year of Publication

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This impressive F&SF debut is a gripping contemporary ghost story which also presents a fascinating and convincing picture of a young actress. Mr. Godwin writes that he is a reformed actor whose latest novel, FIRELORD, was published by Doubleday in 1980. He is the co-author (with Marvin Kaye) of THE MASTERS OF SOLITUDE and its recently completed sequel, WINTERMIND.

The Fire When It

BY

PARKE GODWIN

Got to wake up soon.

I've been sick a long time, I mean really sick. Hard to remember why or how long, but it feels like that time I had hundred-and-three fever for a week. Sleep wasn't rest but endless, meaningless movement, and I'd wake up to change my sweaty nightdress for a clean one which would be soaked by sunup.

But this boring, weary dream has gone on for ages. I'm walking up and down the apartment trying to find the door. The furniture isn't mine. People come and go, replaced by others with even tackier sofas in colors loud enough to keep them awake, and I flutter around and past them on my own silly route as if I'd lost an earring and had to find it before I could get on with life. None of it's very real, murky as *cinema-verité* shot in a broom closet. I have to strain to recognize the apartment, and the sound track just mumbles. No feeling at all.

Just that it's gone on so long.

All right, enough of this. Lying around sick and fragile is romantic as hell, but I have to get it together, drop the needle on the world again and let it play. I'm —

Hell, I am out of it, can't even remember my name, but there's a twinge of pain in trying. Never mind, start with simple things. Move your hand, spider your fingers out from under the

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Comes

covers. Rub your face, open your eyes.

That hasn't worked the last thousand times. I can't wake up, and in a minute the stupid dream will start again with a new cast and no script, and I'll be loping up and down after that earring or the lost door. Hell, yes. Here it comes. Again.

No. It's different this time. I'd almost swear I was awake, standing near the balcony door with the whole long view of my apartment stretching out before me: living room, pullman kitchen, the bedroom, bathroom like an afterthought in the rear. It's clear daylight, and the apartment is bare. Sounds are painfully sharp. The door screams open and shuts like thunder.

A boy and a girl.

She's twenty-two at the outside, he's not much older. He looks sweet, happy and maybe a little scared. Nice face, the kind of sensitive expression you look at twice. The girl's mouth is firmer. Small and blonde and compact. I know that expression, tentative only for a moment before she begins to measure my apartment for possibilities, making it hers.

"Really a lot of room," she says. "I could do things with this place if we had the money."

My God, they're so *loud*. The boy drifts toward me while she bangs cupboard doors, checks out the bathroom, flushes the toilet.

"The john works. No plumbing problems."

"Al, come here. Look, a balcony."

"Wow, Lowen, is that for real?"

Of course it's real, love. Open the door, take a look and then get the hell out of my dreams.

"Let's look, Al." He invites the girl with one hand and opens the balcony door. He's in love with her and doesn't quite know how to handle it all yet. They wander out onto my tiny balcony and look down at 77th Street and out over the river where a garbage scow is gliding upstream. It's a lovely day. Jesus, how long since I've seen the sun? Kids are romping in the playground across Riverside Drive. Lowen and Al stand close together. When he pulls her to him, her hand slips up over his shoulder. The gold ring looks new.

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"Can we afford it, Lowen?"

"We can if you want it."

"If? I never wanted anything so much in my life."

They hold each other and talk money as if it were a novelty, mentioning a rent way over what I pay. The frigging landlord would love to hang that price tag on this place. Lowen points to the drainpipe collar bedded in a patch of cement, monument stone to my epic battle with that bastard to clear the drain and anchor it so every rain didn't turn my balcony into a small lake. Lowen's pointing to letters scratched in the cement.

"GAYLA."

That's right, that's me. I remember now.

They look through the apartment again, excited now that they think they want it. Yes, if they're careful with their budget, if they get that cash wedding present from Aunt Somebody, they can work it. I feel very odd; something is funny here. They're too real. The dream is about them now.

Hey, wait a minute, you two.

The door bangs shut after them.

Hey, wait!

I run out onto the balcony and call to them in the street, and for the first time in this fever dream, I'm conscious of arms and legs that I still can't feel, and a fear growing out of a clearing memory.

Hey, hello. It's me, Gayla Damon.

Lowen turns and tilts his head as if he heard me, or perhaps for one more look at where he's going to live with Al-short-for-Alice. I can't tell from his smile, but I lean to it like a fire in winter, out over the low stone parapet — and then, oh Christ, I remember. For one terrible, sufficient flash, the memory flicks a light switch.

If I could cry or be sick, I'd do that. If I screamed loud enough to crack the asphalt on West End Avenue, nobody would hear. But I let it out anyway, and my scream fills the world as Lowen and Al stroll away toward Riverside Drive.

As if they could actually see me hunched over the balcony edge, head shaking back and forth in despair. They could will their real bodies to stop, real eyes lift again to a real, vacant balcony.

Because they're real. I'm not. Not sick or dreaming, just not.

You died, Gayla baby. You're dead.

The last couple of days have been bad. Panic, running back and forth, scared to death or life, I don't know which, trying to find a way out without knowing where to go or why. I know I died, God, am I sure of that, but not how or how to get out.

There's no frigging door! Lowen and Al sail in and out unloading their junk, but when I try to find the door, it's Not, like me. I'm stuck here. I guess that's what frightens all of us because you can't imagine Not. I never bought the MGM version of heaven. For me,

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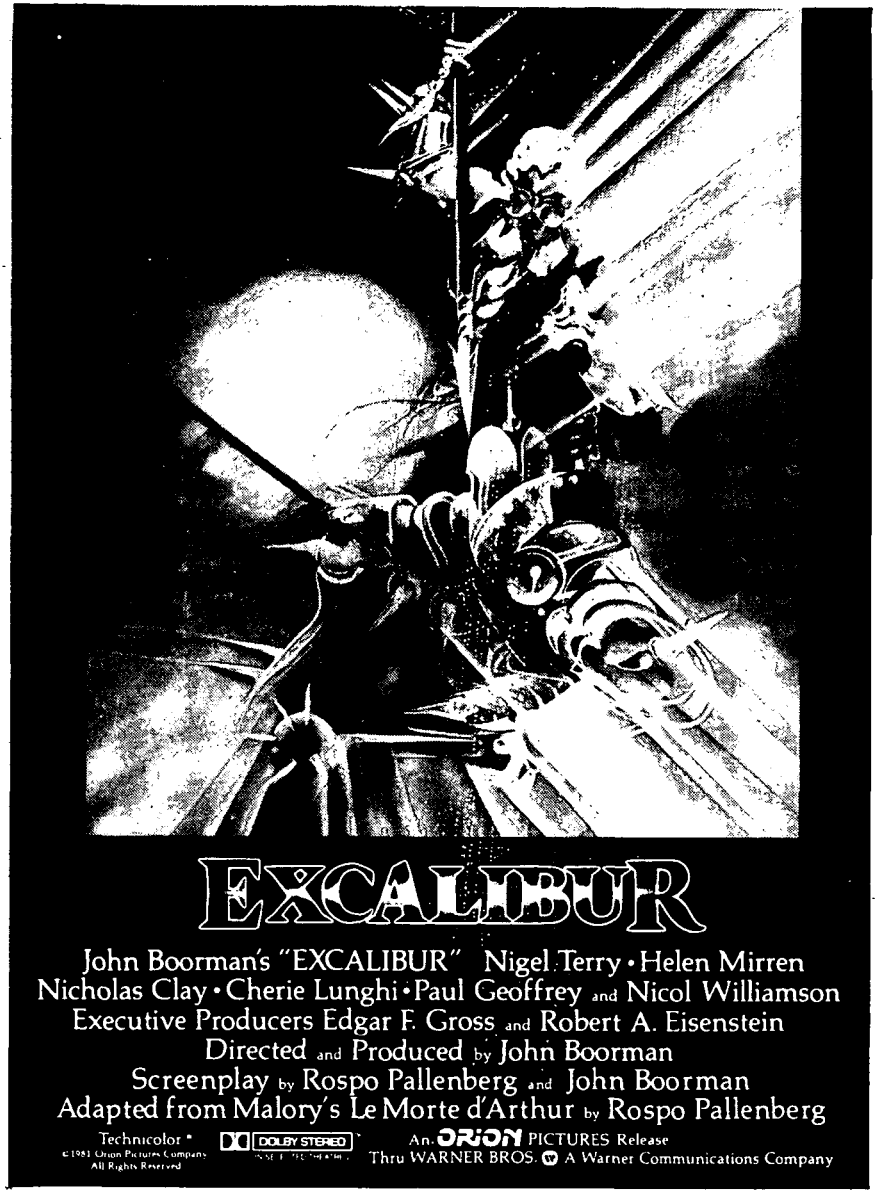
EXCALIBUR
John Boorman's "EXCALIBUR" Nigel Terry • Helen Mirren
Nicholas Clay • Cherie Lunghi • Paul Geoffrey and Nicol Williamson
Executive Producers Edgar F. Gross and Robert A. Eisenstein
Directed and Produced by John Boorman
Screenplay by Rospo Pallenberg and John Boorman
Adapted from Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur by Rospo Pallenberg
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being dead was simply not being, zero, zilch, something you can't imagine. The closest you can come is when a dentist knocks you out with pentothol or how you felt two years before you were born.

No. I don't end, you say. Not me, not the center of the universe. And yet it's happened and I'm stuck with it, no way out, trying to hack the whole thing at once, skittering back and forth from the bedroom to the living room, through the kitchen with its new cream paint, crawling like cigarette smoke in the drapes, beating my nothing-fists against the wall sometimes, collapsing out of habit and exhaustion into a chair or bed I can't feel under me, wearing myself out with the only sensation left, exhaustion and terror.

I'm not dead. I can't be dead, because if I am, why am I still here. Let me out!

To go where, honey?

There's a kind of time again. Al's pinned up a Japanese art calendar in the kitchen, very posh. This month it's a samurai warrior drawing his sword; either that or playing with himself. I can't see it that well, but the date is much too clear. 1981. No wonder the rent's gone up. Seven years since I —

No, that word is a downer. Exited is better. Just how is still a big fat blank wrapped in confusion. All I remember is my name and a few silly details about the apartment. No past, no memory to splice the little snippets of film that flash by too swiftly to catch. Not that it matters, but where's my body? Was I buried or burned, scattered or canned in memoriam in some mausoleum? Was there a husband, a lover? What kind of life did I have?

When I think hard, there's the phantom pain of someone gone, someone who hurt me. That memory is vaguely connected with another of crying into the phone, very drunk. I can't quite remember, just how it made me feel. Got to organize and think, I've worn myself out running scared, and still no answers. The only clear thought is an odd little thing; there must have been a lot of life in me to be kept so close to it.

Don't ask me about death. The rules are all new. I might be the first of the breed. It's still me, but unable to breathe or sleep or get hungry. Just energy that can still run down from overuse, and when that happens, Lowen and Al grow faint. That's all there is to me now, evergy, and not much of that. I have to conserve, just float here by Al's painfully correct window drapes and think.

Does anyone know I'm here. I mean, Anyone?

A few more days. Al and Lowen are all moved in. Al's decor works very hard at being House Beautiful, an almost militant graciousness. Style with clenched teeth. And all her china matches — hell, yes, it would. But let's face it: whatever's happening to me is

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because of them. When they're close, I get a hint of solid objects around me, as if I could reach out and touch tables and chairs or Lowen, but touching life costs me energy. The degree of nearness determines how much of my pitiful little charge is spent. Like being alive in a way. Living costs. I learned that somewhere.

Just got the hell scared out of me. Al has a mirror in the bedroom, a big antique affair. Sometimes when she brushes her hair, I stand behind her, aching out of habit to get that brush into my own mop. Tonight as I watched, I saw myself behind her.

I actually jumped with fright, but Al just went on pumping away with the brush while I peered over her head at Gayla Damon. Thirty-three — I remember that now — and beginning to look it. Thank God that won't bother me any more. Yes, I was tall. Brownish-black hair not too well cut. Thin face, strong jaw, eyes large and expressive. They were my best feature, they broadcast every feeling I ever had. Lines starting around my mouth. Not a hard mouth but beginning to turn down around the edges, a little tired. Hardness would have helped, I guess. Some of Natalie Bond's brass balls.

Nattie Bond: a name, another memory.

No, it's gone, but there was a kind of pain with it. I stared at the mirror. Cruddy old black sweater and jeans: was I wearing them? You'd think I could check out in something better. Hey, brown eyes, how did they do you for the curtain call? Touch of pancake, I hope. You always looked dead without it. Oh, shit ....

A little crying helps. Even dry it's something.

I watch Lowen more and more, turning to him as a flower follows the sun, beginning to learn why I respond to him. Lowen's a listener and a watcher. He can be animated when he's feeling good or way down if he's not. Tired, depressed or angry, his brown eyes go almost black. Not terribly aggressive, but he does sense and respond to the life going on around him.

He likes the apartment and being quiet in it. He smokes, too, not much but enough to bother Al. They've worked out a compromise: anywhere but the bedroom. So, sometimes, I get a surprise visit in the living room when Lowen wakes up and wants a smoke. He sits for a few minutes in the dark, cigarette a bright arc from his mouth to the ashtray. I can't tell, but sometimes it seems he's listening to pure silence. He turns his head this way and that — toward me sometimes — and I feel weird; like he was sifting the molecules of silence, sensing a weight in them. Sometimes in the evening when he and Al are fixing dinner, Lowen will raise his head in that listening way.

It's a long-shot hope, but I wonder if he can feel *me*.

Why has he brought me back to time and space and caring? All these years there's been only blurred shad-

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ows and voices faint as a radio in the next room. Real light and sound and thought came only when he walked in. When Lowen's near, I perk up and glow; when he leaves, I fade to drift, disinterested, by the balcony door.

Lowen Sheppard: twenty-four at most, gentle, unconsciously graceful, awkward only when he tries to be more mature than he is. Don't work at it, lover, it'll come. Soft, straight brown hair that he forgets to cut until Al reminds him, which is often. She's great on detail, lives by it. Faces this apartment like a cage of lions to be tamed. Perhaps it's the best she ever had.

Lowen seems used to this much or maybe better. Mister nice guy, not my type at all, and yet I'm bound to him by a kind of fascination, bound without being able to touch his hair or speak to him. And it's no use wondering why, I'm learning that, too. Like that old Bergman flick where Death comes to collect Max Von Sydow. Max says, "Tell me what eternity is like."And Death says, "Who knows? I just work here."

Don't call us. We'll call you.

Well, damnit, *someone* is going to know I'm here. If I can think, I can do, and I'm not going to sit here forever just around the corner from life. Lowen and Al are my world now, the only script left to work with. I'm a part of their lives like a wart on the thigh, somewhere between God and a voyeur.

Wait, a memory just ... no. Gone too quick again.

If I could touch Lowen somehow. Let him know.

Lowen and Al are settled in, place for everything and everything in its place, and Al daring it to get out of line. Lowen works full time, and Al must do some part-time gig. She goes out in the early afternoon. The lights dim then. Just as well; I don't like what she's done with my apartment. Everything shrieks its price at you, but somehow Al's not comfortable with it. Maybe she never will be. That mouth is awful tight. She wanted to keep plastic covers over the sofa and chairs, the kind that go *crunkle* when you sit on them and make you feel like you're living in a commercial. But Lowen put his foot down on that.

"But, Al, they're to use, not just to look at."

"I know, but they're so nice and new."

"Look, I wear a rubber when we make love. I don't need them on the furniture."

She actually blushed. "Really, Lowen."

Son of a — she makes him — ? Do guys still wear those things? Whatever happened to the sexual revolution?

It's indicative of their upbringing the way each eats, too. Al sits erect at the table and does the full choreography with her knife and fork, as if disapproving mama was watching her all the time. Cut the meat, lay the knife

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down, cross the fork to her right hand, spear, chew, swallow, and the whole thing over again. Left hand demurely in her lap.

Lowen leans slightly into his plate, what-the-hell elbows on the table. More often than not, he uses the fork in his left hand, placing things on it with his knife. The way he handles them both, he's definitely lived in England or Europe. Not born there, though. The fall of his speech has a hint of softness and mid-South nasal. Virginia or Maryland. Baltimore, maybe.

Perhaps it's just plain jealousy that puts me off Alice. She's alive. She can reach out and touch, hold, kiss what I can only look at. She's the strength in this marriage, the one who'll make it work. Lowen's softer, easier, with that careless assurance that comes from never having to worry about the rent or good clothes. He's been given to; Al's had to grab and fight. Now he's got a job and trying to cut it on his own for the first time. That's scary, but Al helps. She does a pretty fair job of supporting Lowen without letting him notice it too much.

She has her problems, but Lowen comes first. She gets home just before him, zips out to get fresh flowers for the table. A quick shower and a spritz of perfume, another swift agony at the mirror. And then Lowen is home and sitting down to dinner, telling her about the day. And Al listens, not so much to the words but the easy, charming sound, the quality she loves in him, as if she could learn it for herself. She's from New York, probably the Bronx. I remember the accent somehow. Petite and pretty, but she doesn't believe it no matter how much attention Lowen gives her. Spends a lot of time at the mirror when he's gone, not admiring but wondering. What does she really look like. What type is she, what kind of an image does she, should she, project; and can she do it? Lipstick: this shade or that? So she fiddles and narrows her eyes, scrutinizing the goods, hopes for the advertised magic of Maybelline and ends up pretty much the same: more attractive than she thinks, not liking what she sees.

Except she doesn't see. She's carried it around all her life, too busy, too nervous and insecure to know what she's got. Stripped down for a bath, Al looks like she never had a pimple or a pound of fat in her life, but I swear she'll find something wrong, something not to like.

Don't slop that goo on your face, girl. You're great already. God, I only wish I had your skin. The crap I had to put on and take off every night, playing parts like —

Parts like ....

My God, I remember!

I was an actress. That's what I remember in quick flashes of hard light. The pictures whiz by like fast cars, but they're slowing down: stage sets, snatches of dialogue, dim faces in the front rows. Bill Wrenn giving me a piece of business to work out. Frag-

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ments of me like a painting on shattered glass. I grope for the pieces, fitting them together one by one.

Bill Wrenn: there's a warm feeling when I think of him, a trusting. Where did I meet him? Yes, it's coming back.

Bill directed that first season at Lexington Rep. Gentle and patient with a weariness that no longer expected any goodies from life, he always reminded me of a harried sheepdog with too many sheep to hustle. Forty years old, two marriages and struck out both times, not about to fall hard again.

But he did for me. I made it easy for him. We were out of the same mold, Bill and I. He sensed my insecurity as a woman and found ways to make it work for me onstage, found parts in me I'd never dream of playing. With most men, my whole thing began in bed and usually ended there. Bill and I didn't hurry; there was a love first. We enjoyed and respected each other's work, and theater was a church for us. We'd rehash each performance, sometimes staying up all night to put an extra smidge of polish on business or timing, to get a better laugh, to make something good just a hair better. We started with a love of something beyond us that grew toward each other, so that bed, when it came, was natural and easy as it was gorgeous.

I made him love me, my one genuine conquest. We even talked about getting married — carefully skirting around a lot of if's. I seem to remember him asking me one night in Lexington. I *think* he asked then; there's a thick haze of vodka and grass over that night. Did I say yes? Not likely; by that time the old habits were setting in.

It was too good with Bill. That's not funny. Perfection, happiness, these are frightening things. Very few of us can live with them. After a while, I began to resent Bill. I mean, who the hell was he to take up so much of my life? I began to pick at him, finding things not to like, irritating habits like the nervous way he cleared his throat or dug in his ear when he was thinking out some stage problem; the way he picked his feet in bed and usually left the bathroom a mess. Just bitchiness. I even over reacted when he gave me notes after a performance. All bullshit and panic; just looking for a way out. How dare you love me, Bill Wrenn? Who asked you? Where did I get that way, where did it begin?

When Nick Charreau came into the company, he was tailor-made for me.

He was alone onstage the first time I saw him, a new cast replacement going through his blocking with the stage manager. Everything his predecessor did, Nick adjusted to show himself in a better light. He wasn't a better actor, but so completely, insolently sure of himself that he could pull off anything and make it look good, even a bad choice. Totally self-centered: if there were critics in the house, Nick lit up like a sign, otherwise it was just another working night in the sticks.

Nick was a lot better looking than

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Bill and eighteen years younger. Even-featured with a sharp, cool, detached expression. Eyes that looked right through you. He could tell me things wrong with myself that would earn Bill Wrenn a reaming out, but I took it from Nick. He didn't get close or involved all the way down. Perhaps that's why I chose him, out of cowardice. He wouldn't ever ask me to be a person.

When he finished the blocking session, I came down to lean on the stage apron. "You play that far back, you'll upstage everyone else in the scene."

"It's my scene. I'm beautifully lit up there." Nick's smile was friendly with just the right soupçon of cockiness. A little above us all, just enough to tickle my own self-doubt and make me want to take him on. I can handle you, mister. You're not so tough.

But he was. There was always part of Nick I couldn't reach or satisfy. I started out challenged, piqued, to cut him down to size in bed and ended up happy if he'd just smile at me.

Looking over Al's shoulder in the mirror, I know it's not what we're born but what we're made into. The game is called Hurt me, I haven't suffered enough. I needed a son of a bitch like Nick. You don't think I'd go around deserving someone like Bill, do you?

Call that weird, Alice? You're the same song, different verse. You have that wary, born-owing-money look yourself. You handle it better than I did — you knew a good man when you saw one — but you still feel like a loser.

The fights with Bill grew large, bitter and frequent. He knew what was happening and it hurt him. And one night we split.

"When will you grow up, Gayla?"

"Bill, don't make it harder than it has to be. Just wish me luck."

Dogged, tired, plopping fresh ice-cubes into his drink. "I care about you. About you, Gayla. That makes it hard. Nick's twenty-two and about an inch deep. He'll split in six months and you'll be out in the cold. When will you learn, Gay? It's not a game, it's not a great big candy store. It's people."

"I'm sorry, Bill."

"Honey," he sighed, "you sure are."

I still hovered, somehow needing his blessing. "Please? Wish me luck?"

Bill raised his glass, not looking up. "Sure, Gay. With Nick you'll need it."

"What's that mean?"

"Nothing, forget it."

"No, you don't just say things like that."

"Sorry, I'm all out of graciousness."

"What did you mean I'll need it."

Bill paused to take a swallow of his drink. "Come on, Gay. You're not blind."

"Other women? So what."

"Other anybody."

"Oh boy, you're — "

"Nick swings both ways."

"That's a lie!"

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"He'd screw a light socket if it helped him to a part."

That was the nastiest thing Bill ever said about anyone. I felt angry and at the same time gratified that he made it easier to walk out mad. "Good-bye, Bill."

And then he looked up at me, showing what was hidden before. Bill Wrenn was crying. Crying for me, the only person in this fucking world who ever did. All the pain, anger, loss, welling up in those sad sheepdog eyes. I could have put my arms around him and stayed ... no, wait, the picture's changing. I'm here in the apartment. *Get him out of here, Nick* —

No, it goes too fast or I will it to go. I can't, won't remember that yet because it hurts too much, and like a child I reach, cry out for the one thing I could always trust.

Bill-l-l —

Not a scream, just the memory of sound.

Lowen looks up from his book, puzzled. "Al? You call me?"

No answer. It's late, she's asleep.

Once more Lowen seems to listen, feeling the air and the silence, separating its texture with his senses. Searching. Then he goes back to his book, but doesn't really try to read.

He heard me. He heard *me*. I can reach him.

Sooner or later, he'll know I'm here. Bust my hump or break my heart, I'll do it. Somehow. I've got to live, baby. Even dead, it's all I know how to do.

* * *

I've hit a new low, watched Lowen and Al make love. At first I avoided it, but gradually the prospect drew me as hunger draws you to a kitchen; hunger no longer a poignant memory but sharp need that grows with my strength.

I've never watched love-making before. Porn, yes, but that's for laughs, a nowhere fantasy. One of the character men in Lexington had a library of films we used to dig sometimes after a show, hooting at their ineptness. They could make you laugh or even horny now and then, but none of them ever dealt with reality. Porn removes you from the act, puts it at a safe distance.

Real sex is awkward, banal and somehow very touching to watch. It's all the things we are and want: involvement, commitment, warmth, passion, clumsiness, generosity or selfishness. Giving and receiving or holding back, all stained with the colors of openness or fear, lovely — and very vulnerable. All that, and yet the words are inadequate; you can't get any of that from watching. Like the man said, you had to be there.

Rogers and Astaire these two are not. It's all pretty straight missionary and more of an express than a local. Lowen does certain things and Al tries a few herself, sort of at arm's length and without much freedom. I don't think Lowen's had much experience, and Al, though she needs sex, probably learned somewhere that she oughtn't

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like it all that much. She's the new generation; she's heard it's her right and prerogative, but the no-no was bred in early. So she compromises by not enjoying it, by making it uphill for both of them. She inhibits Lowen without meaning to. He has to wait so long for her to relax and then work so hard to get her going. And of course at the best moment, like an insurance commercial in the middle of a cavalry charge, he has to stop and put on that stupid rubber. I wonder if Al's Catholic, she never heard of a diaphragm? Or maybe it's money. That's not so far out. Maybe she's uptight about getting pregnant because she remembers how it was to grow up poor. Maybe it's a lot of things adding up to tense ambivalence, wondering why the bells don't ring and the earth shake like she read in *Cosmopolitan*. I seem to remember that trip.

She doesn't give herself much time to relish it afterward, either. Kiss-kiss-bang-bang, then zip with the kleenex and pit-pat into the shower as if someone might catch them. Maybe that's the way it was before they married, a habit that set before either of them realized it.

But I've touched Lowen. God, yes, for one galvanized split-second I felt his body against me. I paid for it, but it had to be.

It was after they made love and Al did her sprint from bed through the shower and into her nightie-cocoon. Lowen went into the bathroom then. I heard the shower running and drifted in after him.

His body looked marvelous; smooth light olive against Al's blue flower-patterned bath curtains, the soap lather standing out sharp white against the last of his summer tan. Not too muscular; supple like Nick. It'll be a while before he has to worry about weight.

Lowen soaped and rinsed, and I enjoyed the shape of his chest and shoulders when he raised his arms over his head.

You're beautiful, Mr. Sheppard.

I had to do it then. I moved in and kissed him, *felt* his chest, stomach, his hardness against the memory of my pelvis. Only a second, a moment when I had to hold him.

The sensation that shivered through me was like a sudden electric shock. I pulled back, frightened and hurt, hovering in the shower curtain. Lowen jerked, grabbing for the towel rack, taut, scared as myself. Then, slowly, the fear faded and I saw that listening, probing attitude in the lift of his head before the instinctive fear returned. Lowen snapped the water off; stumbled out of the tub and just sat down on the john, dripping and shaking. He sat there for minutes, watching the water drying on his skin, runneling down the sides of the tub. Once he put a hand to his lips. They moved, forming a word I couldn't hear.

You felt me, damn you. You know

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I'm here. If I could just talk to you.

But the exhaustion and pain ebbed me. We slumped at opposite ends of the small bathroom, Lowen staring through me, not hearing the sob, the agony of the pictures that flashed into life. Touching him, I remember. After the shock of life comes the memory, filling me out by one more jagged fragment, measuring me in pain.

Al, Al, frowning at your mirror, wondering what magic you lack — I should have your problem. The guys probably lined up around the block when you were in school. Not for Gayla Damon; hell, that wasn't even my real name, not for a long, hard time. First there was big, fat Gail Danowski from the Bronx like you, and at seventeen what your men prayed for and likely never got, I couldn't give away.

Why do I have to remember that? Please, I tried so hard to get away from it. My father who worked for the city as a sandhog, my dumpy mother with her permanent look of washed-out disgust, both of them fresh off the boat in 1938. My sister Sasha who got married at seventeen to get away from them. Big change: all Zosh did after that was have kids for that beer-drinking slob husband of hers. Jesus, Charlie disgusted me. Sunday afternoons he'd come over and watch football with my father, swill beer and stuff potato chips. Every once in a while he'd let out a huge belch, then sigh and pat his pot gut like he was so goddamn pleased with himself. For years, while Zosh's teeth went and her skin faded to chalk delivering five kids.

And me growing up in the middle of it, waiting for the big event of the day in the south Bronx, the Good Humor truck out on the street.

"Mommy, Mommy, the goo-joomer's here! C'n I have a dime for the goojoomer?"

"Y'fadda din leave me no money."

Urgent jingling from the Good Humor, ready to leave and take excitement with it. "Mommy!"

"Geddouda here. I ain't got no dime, now shaddup."

I used to think about that a lot: a lousy dime. So little and so much to a kid. Go to hell, Momma. Not for the dime, but for a whole beauty you never had and never missed. You weren't going to keep me from it.

It wasn't much better in high school. I was embarrassed to undress for gym because of the holes in my underwear. And the stains sometimes because I had to use Momma's kotex and she didn't care if she ran out. I could have used tampax; virgin or not, I was a big, healthy ox like her and Zosh. I could have conceived an army. When Momma found the tampax I bought, she slapped me halfway across the room.

"What's this, hah? *Hah?* I ain't got enough trouble, you started already? You sneakin around, you little bitch?"

No such luck, Momma. They didn't want me. The closest I got to

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boys was talking about them. Sitting in a coffee shop over the debris of my cheap, starchy lunch, the table a garbage dump of bread crusts, spilled sugar and straw wrappers, shredding food bits and paper ends like our envious gossip dissected the girls we knew and the boys we wanted to know.

I never had any sense about men or myself. That happens when you're five foot seven in high school and still growing. A sequoia in a daisy bed, lumpy and lumbering, addicted to food, my refuge when I lost the courage for school dances. I fled home to the ice box and stayed there, eating myself out of my clothes, smearing my acne with Vis-o-Hex, or huddled for hours in a movie, seeing it twice over to pretend I was Hepburn or Bacall, slim, brittle and clever. Or Judith Anderson, tearing hell out of *Medea*. I read the play and practiced the lines at my mirror with stiff approximations of her gestures.

But it was *A Streetcar Named Desire* that changed my life. I hardly spoke for days after seeing it. The play stabbed me deep and sparked something that was going to be. I bought more plays and devoured them. Fewer trips to the movies now and more downtown to Broadway and the Village. Live theater, not unreeling on a spool, but happening the moment I saw it.

I was still a lump, still a hundred and fifty pounds of un-lusted-after virgin bohunk, and nobody was going to star Gail Danowski in anything but lunch. I walked alone with my dreams while the hungers grew.

You can go a little mad with loneliness, past caring. Virginity? I couldn't give it away, Momma; so I threw it away. No big Zanuck production, just a boy and a party I can't picture too clearly. We were drinking and wrestling, and I thought: all right, why not? Just once I'm gonna grab a little happiness even if it's just getting laid, what am I saving it for? But I had to get drunk before he fumbled at me. If there was pain or pleasure, I barely felt them, only knew that at last I tasted life where it sprang from the fountain. A meager cup, the cut version, the boy pulling at his clothes afterward, distant, disgusted.

"Shit, whyn't you tell me, Gail?"

Tell you what, lover? That I was a virgin, that by accident you were first? Is that a guilt trip? Whatever I lost, don't mourn it. Cry for the other things we lose in parked cars and motel beds because we're too drunk or there's too much guilt or fear for beauty. It was the beauty I missed. Be first any time, score up a hundred stiff, clumsy girls, say the silly words, break a hundred promises, brag about it afterwards. But leave something of yourself, something of beauty. Only that, and you part with a blessing.

He didn't.

The next morning, hung over and miserable, I looked at that frazzled

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thing in the mirror, had clean through and down to rock bottom, and knew from here on out I'd have to be me or just another Zosh. That day I started to build Gayla Damon.

I graduated an inch taller and thirty pounds lighter, did hard one-week stock as an apprentice. Seventeen hours a day of walk-ons, painting scenery, fencing and dance classes. Diction: practicing for hours with a cork between my teeth —

"Baby, the word is dance. DAAnce, hear the A? Not de-e-ance. Open your mouth and *use* it when you speak."

— Letting my hair grow and moving down to Manhattan, always running away from that lump in the mirror. I never outran her. She was always there, worrying out of my eyes at a thousand auditions, patting my stomach and thighs, searching a hundred dressing room mirrors, plastering pancake on imagined blemishes, grabbing any man's hand because it was there. The years just went, hurrying by like strangers on a street, trailing bits of memory like broken china from a dusty box: buses, planes, snatches of rehearsal, stock, repertory, old reviews.

> Miss Damon's talent is raw but unmistakable. When she's right, she *is* theater, vivid, filled with primordial energy that can burn or chill. If she can learn to control ... she was superbly cast as....

— A self-driven horse record-time sprinting from nowhere to noplace. Life? I lived it from eight to eleven o'clock every night and two matinees a week. For three hours each night, I loved, hated, sang, sorrowed enough for three lifetimes. Good houses, bad houses, they all got the best of me because my work had a love behind it. The rest was only fill, and who cared? Season after season of repertory, a dozen cities, a dozen summer towns barely glimpsed from opening night to closing, a blur of men and a lot of beds, flush or broke, it didn't matter.

Zosh caught a show once when I was playing in Westchester, Poor Zosh: pasty and fat as Momma by then, busting out of her dresses and her teeth shot. She came hesitantly into my dressing room, wondering if someone might throw her out. The first stage play she ever saw. She didn't know really what to make of it.

"Oh, it was great and all. You look good, Gail. God, you really got some figure now, what size you wear? I never knew about plays. You know me'n school, I always got my girlfriend to write my reports."

She barely sipped the scotch I poured her. "Charlie never buys nothin' but beer." I wanted to take her out for a good dinner, but, no, she had a sitter at home and it was expensive, and Charlie would yell if she came home too late when he was out bowling.

"Let the dumb ox yell. You're entitled once in a while."

"Hey, you really gettin'a mouth on

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you, Gail."

"Speaking of that, doesn't Charlie ever look at yours? Doesn't he know you need a dentist?"

"Well, you know how it is. The kids take it out of you."

I gave Zosh a hundred dollars to get her teeth fixed. She wrote that she spent it on the house and kids. *There was the gas bill and Christmas. You cant complain theres nobody on the other end of the phone. Ha-ha. My friends all want to know when your on TV.*

Are you still around, Zosh? Not that it matters. They buried you years ago. No one was going to do that to me.

And then suddenly I was thirty, that big, scary number. Working harder, running harder without knowing where, doing the where-did-it-all-go bit now and then (while the lights caught her best, most expressive angle). Where are you now, Bill? You must be pushing fifty. Did you find someone like me or just the opposite. I wouldn't blame you.

And how about you, Nick?

He'll split in six months. You'll be out in the cold.

When Bill said that, I remember thinking: hell, he's right. I'm thirty-two and after that comes thirty-three. Fourteen years, seven dollars in the bank, and where the hell am I?

But I was hung up on Nick's body and trying to please him. Perhaps there were other, unspoken things that have nothing to do with loving or sex. You get used very early to not liking yourself. You know you're a fraud, someday they'll all know. The Lump hiding inside your dieted figure and with-it clothes knows you haven't changed, no matter what. The Lump doesn't want to like you. How can she tolerate anyone who does? No, she'll sniff out someone who'll keep her in her lowly place.

Crimes and insanities. Hurting Bill was a very countable sin, but I knew what I needed. So it was Nick, not Bill, who moved in here with me.

And where are you this dark night, Nick? Did you make the big time? I hope so. You're almost thirty now. That's getting on for what you had to sell. Your kind of act has a short run.

My mind wanders like that when Lowen's not around.

Energy builds again, the lights dim up. I drift out onto the balcony, feeling that weight of depression it always brings. My sense of color is dimmed because the kids are asleep. 77th Street is a still shot in black and white. Not a soul, not even a late cab whispering up Riverside Drive.

Hey, look: there's a meteor, a falling star. Make a wish: be happy, Bill Wrenn.

And listen! A clock tower. Even with Lowen asleep, I can hear it. Two-three-four o'clock. Definitely, I'm getting stronger. More and more I can feel

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and sometimes see my legs when I walk, less like floating in a current. I move back through the apartment to hover over Lowen as he sleeps. Wanting. Wondering.

After all this time, why should it be Lowen who wakes me? Nothing's clear but that I can touch life again with him. If that's wrong, I didn't write the script. Name any form of life you want. A cold germ is just a bug trying to make a living in the only way it knows, in a place it doesn't understand, and it only takes a little out of the place trying. That's me, that's all of us. I'll take what I need to live. If there's air to breathe, don't tell me I can't. That's academic.

Al sleeps tiny and still beside Lowen, hardly a bump under the covers. It must be wonderful to sleep like that. I could never stay out more than two hours at a time. No, wait: here she comes up out of it with a sigh and turnover that barely whispers the covers. She slides out of bed and pit-pats to the bathroom. Bladder the size of an acorn, up three times a night like I was.

When the john flushes, Lowen stirs and mumbles, flops over and sinks again. The bathroom door creaks, Al slips back in beside him. She doesn't settle down yet, but rests on one elbow, a momentary vigil over Lowen, a secret protecting. I'll bet he doesn't know she watches him like that. Then she slides under the covers very close, one arm over him, fingers spread lightly on his skin.

To lie beside Lowen like that, to touch him simply by willing it. If that were my hand resting on his skin. What wouldn't I give for that?

The idea is sudden and frightening. Why not?

If I could get inside Al, stretch out my arm inside hers, wear it like a glove; just for a moment move one real finger over Lowen's skin. It couldn't hurt her, and I need it so.

I wait for Al to fall asleep, scared of the whole notion. It could hurt. It hurt to touch Lowen before. Maybe it's against some natural law. They're flesh, I'm a memory. Lots of maybe's, but I have to try. Slow and scared, I drift down over Al and will what shape there is to me into the attitude of her body. There's no shock when I touch her, but a definite sensation like dipping into swift-running water. So weird, I pull away and have to build up my nerve to try again, settling like a sinking ship as the current of Al's healthy young life surges and tingles around me, and her chest rises and falls like a warm blanket over cozy sleep. My breasts nestle into hers, my arm stretching slowly to fill out the slim contour of her shoulder, elbow, wrist. It's hard and slow, like half-frozen syrup oozing through a hose. My fingers struggle one by one into hers.

So tired. Got to rest.

But I feel life, I *feel* it, humming and bubbling all around me. Jesus, I must have sounded like a steel mill inside, the way I drove myself. The pow-

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er, such a wonder. Why did I waste so much time feeling miserable?

The electric clock glows at 5:03. More minutes pass while each finger tests itself in Al's, and then I try to move one on Lowen's skin.

The shock curdles me. I cringe away from it, shriveling back up Al's arm, all of me a shaky little ball in her middle. Just as in the shower, I felt skin against skin, even the tiny moisture of pores, but it drains me as if I've run five miles.

Rest and try again. Slow, so slow, so hard, but my fingers creep forward into Al's again. Same thing: the instant I let myself feel with Al's flesh, there's a bright shock and energy drains. If that's not enough, those delicate fingers weigh ten pounds each. I push, poop out, rest, try again, the hardest battle of my life, let alone death, and all in dogged silence broken only by their breathing and the muted *whir* of the clock.

6:32. The dark bedroom grays up to morning. I can see Lowen's face clearly now: very young, crumpled with sleep. He can't hear my soundless, exhausted panting like the heartbeat of a hummingbird.

6:48. Twelve minutes before the clock beeps the beginning of their day, one finger, one slender thread binding me to Lowen ... moves. Again. I go dizzy with the sensation but hang on, pouring the last strength into one huge effort. The small hand flexes all five fingers like a crab, sliding over the sparse hair on Lowen's chest. A flash-frame of Bill, of Nick, and a thrill of victory.

Hi, baby. I made it.

Then Al stirs, moves *don't, please, wait!* and flips over on her other side, unconcerned as a pancake. I let go, used up, drifting out to nowhere again, barely conscious of space or objects, too burned out even to feel frustrated after all that work.

But I did it. I know the way now. I'll be back.

Night after night I kept at it, fitting to Al's body, learning how to move her fingers without burning myself out. Stronger and surer, until I could move the whole hand and then the arm, and even if Lowen pressed the hand to his mouth or nestled his cheek against it, I could hold on.

And then I blew it, the story of my life. Klutz-woman strikes again. I tried to get in when they were making love.

I said before they're not too dexterous in the bedroom. Al gets uptight from the start, and I can see her lying there, eyes tight shut over Lowen's shoulder, hoping he'll come soon and get it over with. Not always; sometimes she wants it as much as him, but the old hangups are always there. She holds back, so he holds back. It's usually one-sided and finished soon.

But that evening everything seemed perfect. They had a light supper, several drinks rather than the usual one, and Lowen didn't spare the vodka. They

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just naturally segued to the bedroom, not rushed or nervous, undressing each other slowly, enjoyably, melting into each other's arms. Al brought in a candle from the supper table. Nice touch: Nick and I used to do that. They lie there caressing each other, murmuring drowsily. Lowen looks gorgeous in the soft glow, Al like a little Dresden doll. And me — poor, pathetic afterthought — watching it all and yearning.

Jesus, Al, act like you're alive. That's a man. Take hold of him.

Damn, it was too much. The hell with consequences. I draped myself over Al with the ease of practice, stretched my arms and legs along hers. Foolhardy, yes, but at last *my* arms went around Lowen, smoothing, then clawing down his back.

Love me, baby. Love all of me.

My mouth opened hungrily under his, licking his lips and then nipping at them. I writhed Al's slim body under his, pushed hers hands to explore him from shoulders to thighs. I never had much trouble in bed. If the guy had anything going and didn't run through it like a fire drill, I could come half a dozen times, little ones and big ones, before he got there.

With Lowen it was like all the best orgasms I ever had. The moment before you start to go, you want to hold back, prolong it, but you can't. I was dependent on Al's chemistry now. Her body was strangely stiff as I hauled her over on top of Lowen. Something new for her. She went taut, resisting it.

"Lowen, wait."

He can't wait, though I'm the only one who sees the irony and the lie. Lowen is coming, I certainly want to, but Al is out of it. I want to *scream* at her, though I should have guessed it long before this. She always times her cries with his, as if they came together.

But it's a lie. She's faking it. She's learned that much.

My God, you're alive, the greatest gift anyone ever got. Does a past tense like me have to show you how?

With a strength like life itself, I churned her up and down on Lowen, hard, burning myself out to tear Al's careful controls from her emotions. She moaned, fighting me, afraid.

"Lowen, stop. Please stop."

You don't fake tonight, kid.

"Stop!"

No way. Go ... *go!*

Lowen gripped her spasmodically, and I felt his hips tremble under mine/hers. He couldn't hold back any longer. With the last ounce of my will, I bent Al's body down over his, mouth to mouth.

"Now, Lowen. Now!"

Not Al's voice but mine, the first time I've heard it in seven years. Deeper, throatier than Al's. In the middle of coming, an alien bewilderment flooded Lowen's expression. Al stiffened like she was shot. With a cry of bleak terror, she tore herself loose and leaped clear off the bed, clawing for the lamp switch, big-eyed and terrified in the hard light.

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"Oh, God. Oh, Jesus, what's happening?"

Confused, a little out of it himself now, Lowen sat up to stare back at her. "Al, what's the matter?"

She shuddered. "It's not me."

"What?"

"It's not *me*." She snatched up her bathrobe like the last haven in the world. Lowen reached for her instinctively, comforting.

"It's all right, honey, it's — "

"No. It's like something hot inside me."

He went on soothing her, but he knew. I could see that in his eyes as he pulled Al down beside him. He knew: the last thing I saw, because the lights were going down for me, their last spill playing over memory-fragments before fading. A confused montage: Nick putting on his jacket, me fumbling for the phone, then pulling at the balcony door, and the darkness and the silence then were like dying again.

I've had some hangovers in my time, mornings of agony after a messy, screaming drunk. Coming back to queasy consciousness while the night's party repeats in your mind like a stupid film loop, and you wonder, in a foggy way, if you really spilled that drink on somebody, and — oh, no — you couldn't have said *that* to him, and if you're going to be sick right then or later.

Then the smog clears and you remember. Yeah. You spilled it and did it and you sure as hell said it, and the five best bloody mary's in the world won't help.

I blew it good this time, a real production number. Now they both know I'm here.

December 23. I know the date because Al's carefully crossed the days off her calendar where she never bothered before. I've been turned off for days. Almost Christmas, but you'd never know it around here. No holly, no tree, just a few cards opened and dropped on the little teakwood desk where they keep their bills. When Lowen brushes one aside, I can see a thin line of dust. Al hasn't been cleaning.

The kitchen is cluttered. The morning's dishes are still in the sink. Three cardboard boxes stand on the floor, each half full of wrapped dishes and utensils.

So that's it. They're moving. A moment of panic: where do I go from here, then? All right, it was my fault, but ... don't go, Lowen. I'm not wild about this script myself, but don't ask me to turn out the lights and die again. Because I won't.

There's a miasma of oppression and apprehension all through the apartment. Al's mouth is tighter, her eyes frightened. Lowen comes out into the living room, reluctant and dutiful. Furtively, he tests the air as if to feel me in it. He sits down in his usual chair; 3:13 by the miniature grandfather clock on the book case. The lights and sound

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come up slowly with Lowen's nearness. He's home early this afternoon.

Al brings out the Waterford sherry set and puts it on the coffee table. She sits down, waiting with Lowen. The whole scene reminds me of actors taking places before the curtain rises; Al poised tensely on the sofa, revolving her sherry glass in white fingers; Lowen distant, into his own thoughts. The sound is still lousy.

"...feel silly," Lowen ventures. "... all this way...time off from...just to..."

"No! ... live here like this, not with ..." Al is really shook; takes a cigarette from Lowen's pack on the coffee table and smokes it in quick, inexpert puffs. "You say you can feel her?"

Lowen nods, unhappy. He doesn't like any of this. "I loved this place from the first day."

"Lowen, answer me. Please."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Somewhere close. Always to me."

Al stubs out the cigarette. "And we sure know it's *she*, don't we?"

"Al — "

"Oh, hell! I loved this place too, but this is crazy. I'm *scared*, Lowen. How long have you known?"

"Almost from the start."

"And you never told me."

"Why?" Lowen looks up at her. "I'm not a medium; nothing like this ever happened before. It was weird at first, but then I began to feel that she was just *here* — "

"What!"

"—and part of things ... like the walls. I didn't even know it was a woman at first."

"Until that time in the shower," Al finishes for him. "Bitch."

Thanks a lot, kid. At least I know what to do with him.

"Look, Al, I can't tell you how I know, but I don't think she means any harm."

Al gulps down her sherry and fills the glass. "The — hell — she — doesn't. I'm not into church anymore. Even if I were, I wouldn't go running for the holy water every time a floor creaked, but don't tell me she doesn't mean anything, Lowen. You know what I'm talking about." Her hands dry-wash each other jerkily. "I mean that night, the way we made love. I — always wanted to make love to you like that. That ... free."

The best you ever had, love.

Al gets up and paces, nervous. "All right, I've got these goddamned problems. You get taught certain things are wrong. If it's not for babies, it's wrong. It's wrong to use contraceptives, but we can't afford a baby, and — I don't know, Lowen. The world is crazy. But that night, it wasn't me. Not even my voice."

"No, it wasn't."

Lowen must be way down, depressed, because my energy is wavering with his, and sound fades in and out. There's a muffled knock at the door. Lowen opens it to a bald little man like a wizened guru in a heavy,

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fur-collared overcoat.

Wait, I know this guy. It's that little weasel, Hirajian, from Riverside Realty. He rented me this place. Hirajian settles himself in a chair, briefcase on his knee, declining the sherry Al offers. He doesn't look too happy about being here, but the self-satisfied little bastard doesn't miss Al's legs, which make mine look bush league in retrospect.

I can't catch everything, but Hirajian's puzzled by something Al's saying. No problem about the lease, he allows, apartments rent in two days now, but she's apparently thrown him a curve.

Al now: "... not exactly our wish, but ... "

"Unusual request...never anything ...."

Now Al is flat and clear: "Did you find out?"

Hirajian opens his briefcase and brings out a sheet of paper while I strain at his through-the-wall mumble.

"Don't know why...however...before you...." He runs through a string of names until I make the connection. The tenants who came after me, all those damned extras who wandered through my dreams before Lowen.

Lowen stops him suddenly. He's not as depressed as Al; there's an eagerness in the question. "Did anyone die here?"

"Die?"

"It's very important." Al says.

Hirajian looks like an undertaker's assistant now, all professional solemnity and reluctance. "As a matter of fact, yes. I was getting to that. In 1974, a Miss Danowski."

Lowen's head snaps up. "First name?"

"Gail."

"Anyone named Gayla? Someone cut the name Gayla in the cement on the balcony."

"That was the Danowski woman. Gayla Damon was her stage name. She was an actress. I remember because she put that name on the lease and had to do it again with her legal signature."

"Gayla."

"You knew her, Mr. Sheppard?"

"Gayla Damon. I should, it's awfully familiar, but —"

"Single?" Al asks. "What sort of person was she?"

Hirajian cracks his prim little smile like a housewife leaning over a back fence to gossip. "Yes and no, you know show people. Her boyfriend moved in with her. I know it's the fashion nowadays, but *we*," evidently Riverside and God, "don't approve of it."

There's enough energy to laugh, and I wish you could hear me, you little second-string satyr. You made a pass when you showed me this place. I remember: I was wearing that new tan suit from Bergdorf's, and I couldn't split fast enough. But it was the best place yet for the money, so I took it.

Damn it, how did I die? What happened. Don't fade out, weasel. Project, let me hear you.

Al sets down her sherry glass. "We

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just can't stay here. It's impossible."

Don't go, Lowen. You're all I have, all there is. I won't touch Al, I promise never again. But don't go.

Of course there were promises, Nick. There's always a promise. No one has to spell it out.

I said that once. I'm starting to remember.

While Hirajian patters on, Lowen's lost in some thought. There's something in his eyes I've never seen before. A concern, a caring.

"You mean he didn't come back even when he heard Gayla was dead?"

I love the way he says my name. Like a song, new strength.

"No end of legal trouble," Hirajian clucks. "We couldn't locate him or any family at first. A Mister ... yes, a Mister Wrenn came and made all the arrangements. An old boyfriend, I suppose."

You did that for me, Bill? You came back and helped me out. Boy, what I had and threw away. Sand through my fingers.

"Gayla. Gayla Damon." I grow stronger as Lowen repeats my name, stronger yet as he rises and takes a step toward the balcony door. I could touch him, but I don't dare now. "Yes. Just the name I forgot. It's hard to believe, Al, but it's the only thing I can believe."

Such a queer, tender look. Al reads it too. "What, Lowen?"

He strides quickly away to the bedroom, and the lights dim a little. Then he's back with a folded paper, so lost in some thought that Al just stares at him and Hirajian is completely lost.

"The things we learn about life," Lowen says. "An English professor of mine said once that life is too coincidental for art; that's why art is structured. Mr. Hirajian, you said no one else ever complained of disturbances in this apartment. I'm not a medium, can't even predict the weather. But I'm, beginning to understand a little of this."

Will you tell me, for Christ's sake?

He hands the paper to Al. It looks like an old theater program. "You see, Mister Hirajian, she's still here."

He has to say it again, delicately as possible. Hirajian pooh-poohs the whole notion. "Oh really, now, you can't be sure of something like that."

"We know," Al says in a hard voice. "We haven't told you everything. She, it, something's here, and it's destructive."

"No, I don't think so." Lowen nods to the program. I can't see it too well. "Eagle Lake Playhouse, 1974. I saw her work."

You couldn't have. You were only—

"She played Gwendolyn in *Becket*. That's her autograph by her name."

Where the hell is Eagle Lake? Wait a minute. Wait — a — minute. I'm remembering.

"My father was taking me back to school. I spent my whole life in boarding schools all the way through col-

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lege. Dad thought for our last night together, he'd take me to an uplifting play and save himself making conversation. My parents were very efficient that way.

"Gayla only had one scene, but she was so open, so completely translucent that I couldn't take my eyes off her."

I did play Eagle Lake, and there's a faint memory of some double-breasted country-club type coming back for an autograph for his kid.

"I still remember, she had a line that went: 'My lord cares for nothing in this world, does he?' She turned to Becket then, and you could see a *line* in that turn, a power that reached the other actor and came out to the audience. The other actors were good, but Gayla lit up the stage with something — unbearably human."

Damn right, love. I was gangbusters in that role. And you saw me? I could almost believe in God now, though He hasn't called lately.

"I was sixteen, and I thought I was the only one in the world who could be so lonely. She showed me we're all alike in that. All our feelings touch. Next day I hitchhiked all the way back to the theater from school...." Lowen trails off, loking at Al and the apartment. "And this was her place. She wasn't very old. How did she die?"

"Depressing," Hirajian admits. "Very ugly and depressing, but then suicide always is."

What!

"But as regards your moving out just because —"

The hell I did, no *way*, mister. No. No. NO! I won't listen to any more. Don't believe him, Lowen.

Lowen's on his feet, head tilted in that listening attitude. Al puts down her glass, pale and tense. "What is it?"

"She's here now. She's angry."

"How do you know?"

"Don't ask me how, damn it. I know. She's here."

No, Lowen. On the worst, weakest day of my life, I couldn't do that. Listen. Hear me. Please.

Then Al's up, frightened and desperate. "Go away, whoever you are. For the love of God, go away."

I barely hear her, flinging myself away from them out onto the balcony, silent mouth screaming at the frustration and stupid injustice of it. A lie, a lie, and Lowen is leaving, sending me back to nothing and darkness. But the strength is growing, born of rage and terror. Lowen. Lowen. Lowen. Hear me. I didn't. *Hear me.*

"Lowen, don't!"

I hear Al's voice, then the sudden, sharp sound of the balcony door wrenching open. And as I turn to Lowen, the whole, uncut film starts to roll. And, oh Jesus, I remember.

Eagle Lake. That's where it ended, Lowen. Not here, no matter what they tell you. That's where all the years, parts, buses, beds, the whole game came to an end. When I found that, no

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matter what, none of it worked any more. Maybe I was growing up a little at last, looking for the *me* in all of it.

Funny: I wasn't even going to audition for stock that summer, Bill called me to do a couple of roles at Eagle Lake, and Nick urged me to go. It was a good season, closing with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The owner, Ermise Stour, jobbed in Natalie Bond for Blanche DuBois, and I was to be her understudy. Nattie's name wasn't smash movie box office any more, but still big enough for stock and star-package houses. She'd be Erm's insurance to make up whatever they lost on the rest of the season.

Erm, you tough old bag. You were going to sell that broken-down theater after every season. I'll bet you're still there, chain-smoking over a bottle of Chivas and babying that ratty poodle.

Ermise lived in a rambling ex-hotel with a huge fireplace in the lounge. We had all our opening-night parties there with a big blaze going because Eagle Lake never warmed up or dried out even in August.

At the opening party for *Becket*, all of us were too keyed up to get drunk, running on adrenalin from the show, slopping drinks and stuffing sandwiches, fending off the local reviewers, horny boy scouts with a course in journalism.

Dinner? No thanks. I've got a horrible week coming up, and it's all I can do to shower and fall into bed. Bill, let's get *out* of here. Thanks, you're a jewel, I needed a refill. Gimme your sweater. Jesus, doesn't it ever get warm in this place? You could age beef in our dressing room.

Nick was down for a few days the week before. Bill rather pointedly made himself scarce. He was still in love with me. That must have hurt, working with me day after day, keeping it inside, and I didn't help matters by dragging Nick everywhere like a prize bull: hey, look what I got! Smart girl, Gayla. With a year's study, you could be an idiot.

But Nick was gone, and we'd managed to get *Becket* open despite failing energy, colds, frayed nerves and lousy weather. It was good just to stand with Bill against the porch railing, watching moths bat themselves silly against the overhead light. Bill was always guarded when we were alone now. I kept it light and friendly, asked about his preparations for *Streetcar*. He sighed with an Old Testament flavor of doom.

"Don't ask. Erm had to cut the set budget, first read-through is tomorrow morning, and Nattie's plane won't get in until one. I'm going to be up all night and I'll still only be about five pages ahead of you people on blocking."

"Why's she late?"

"Who the hell knows? Business with her agent or something. You'll have to read in for her."

Good. One more precious rehearsal on my Blanche, one more time to read

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those beautiful words and perhaps find one more color in them before Natalie Bond froze it all in star glitter. That was all I had to look forward to now. The fatigue, the wet summer, lousy houses, all of it accumulated to a desolation I couldn't shrug off. I had a small part in *Streetcar*, but understudying Natalie Bond meant watching her do my role, never to touch the magic myself. Maybe her plane could crash — just a little — but even then, what? Somehow even the thought of Nick depressed me. Back in New York he'd get in to see the right agents where I couldn't, landing commercials, lining up this, grabbing that, always smarter at business than me.

That night before the party, I sat on my bed, staring glumly at the yellow-green wallpaper and my battered Samsonite luggage, and thought: *I'm tired of you. Something's gone. There's gotta be more than this.* And I curled up in my old gray bathrobe, wallowing in self-pity. Nick, you want to get married? Bring me the towel and wash my back? Baby me a little when I feel rotten, like now? There's a big empty place in me wants to be pregnant with more than a part. Tired, negative, I knew Nick would never marry me; I was kidding myself.

So it was good to have Bill there on the porch for a minute. I leaned against him and he put an arm around me. We should have gone to bed and let it be beautiful one more time. It would have been the last.

"Tired, Gay?"

"I want to go home."

Except I never in my whole life found where it was.

Natalie Bond came and conquered. She knew her lines pretty well going in and crammed the rest with me in her room or the restaurant down our street. No one recognized her at first with her hair done just the right shade of fading dishwater blonde for Blanche, most of her thin face hidden behind a huge pair of prescription sunglasses.

She was near-sighted to blindness; some of her intensity on film must have come from trying to feel out the blocking by Braille. But a pro she was. She soaked up Bill's direction, drove herself and us, and I saw the ruthless energy that made Nattie a star.

I saw other things, too. Nattie hadn't been on a live stage for a lot years. She missed values left and right in Blanche and didn't have time to pick them up on a two-week stock schedule. Film is a director's medium. He can put your attention where he wants with the camera. Stage work takes a whole different set of muscles, and hers were flabby, unused to sustaining an action or mood for two and half hours.

But for the first time that season, we were nearly sold out at the box office. Erm was impressed. Bill wasn't.

"They're coming to see a star. She could fart her way through Blanche and they'll still say she's wonderful."

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Maybe, but life wasn't all skittles for Nattie. She had two children in expensive schools and got endless phone calls from her manager in California about taxes.

"I gotta work, honey," she told me over black coffee and dry toast. "The wolf's got my ass in his chops already."

She meant it. Another phone call, and that same afternoon between lunch and rehearsal call, Nattie Bond was gone, and I was sitting in Ermise's living room again while Erm swore back and forth across the worn carpet, waving her drink like a weapon, and Bill tried to look bereaved. He always wanted me for Blanche. He had me now.

"Screwed me from the word go." Ermise sprayed ashes over the rug and her poodle. "She knew this when she signed and never said a goddamn word."

The facts filtered through my rosy haze. Natalie's agent had a picture deal on the coast so close to signing that it was worth it to let Ermise sue. They'd just buy up her contract — if she could be in Los Angeles tomorrow.

Ermise hurled her cigarette into the trash-filled fireplace, gulped the last of her drink and turned a mental page. Nattie was one problem, the show another. "You ready to go, Gayla?"

"In my sleep, love."

I was already readjusting the role to the Blanche in my ear and not as sorry for the box office as Erm. Screw 'em all, they were going to see ten times the Blanche Nattie Bond could give them on the best day she ever worked.

"Bill wants me to give you a raise," Ermise said. "Wish I could, Gay, but things are tight."

I pulled the worn script out of my jeans, grinning like a fool back at Bill, who couldn't hide his glee any more. "Just pay on time, Erm. Keep out of my hair and don't clutter up my stage. Bill, let's go to work."

From my first rehearsal, the play convulsed and became a different animal. The whole cast had to shift gears for me, but no longer suffused by Nattie's hard light they began to find themselves and glimmer with life. I ate and slept with the script while Blanche came sure and clear. Hell, I'd been rehearsing her for fourteen years. It wasn't hard to identify: the hunger for love half appeased in bed-hopping and sexual junk food, and what that does to a woman. The blurred, darkening picture of a girl waiting in her best dress to go to the dance of life with someone who never came.

Then, just as it seemed to be coming together, it went flat, deader than I am now. But out of that death came a beautiful, risky answer.

Blanche DuBois is a bitch of a role and demands a powerhouse actress. That's the problem. Like the aura that surrounds Hamlet, the role accumulates a lot of star-shtick, and something very subtle can get lost. I determined to strip away the layers of gloss and find what was there to begin

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with.

"The part's a trap, Bill. All those fluttery, curlicued lines reach out and beg you to *act* them. And you wind up with dazzle again, a concert performance."

"Cadenzas," he agreed with me. "The old Williams poetry."

"Right! Cadenzas, scales. No, by God. I've played the Deep South. There's a smothered quality to those women that gets lost that way. The script describes her as a moth. Moths don't dazzle. They don't glitter."

"Remember that night on the porch," Bill said thoughtfully. "They don't glitter, but they do need the light."

And that was it. Blanche aspired to the things she painted with foolish words. A dream of glitter seen by a near-sighted person by a failing candle. The lines are ornate, but just possibly, Blanche is not quite as intelligent as she's been played.

A long artistic chance, but they're the only ones worth taking. If you don't have the guts to be wrong, take up accounting.

So my Blanche emerged a very pathetic woman, a little grotesque as such women are, not only desperate for love but logical in her hopes for Mitch. For all Belle Reeve and the inbred magnolias, she's not that far above him. Bill gave me my head, knowing that by finding my own Blanche, even being wrong for a while, I'd find the play's as well. On my terms and with my own reality.

I had three lovely labor-pained days of seeing her come alive. On the third day, I was sitting in a corner of the stage with coffee and a sandwich, digging at the script while the others lunched. When Sally Kent walked in, I snapped at her.

"Where's the rest. It's two o'clock. Let's go."

"They want you over at the office, Gay."

"What the hell for? I don't have time. Where's Bill?"

"At the office," Sally admitted reluctantly. "Natalie Bond is here. She's back in the show."

The kiss of death. Even as I shook my head, no, Erm wouldn't do this to me, I knew she would.

Ermise hunched in a chair by the fireplace, bitter with what she had to do, trying not to antagonize Bill any further. He poised on the sofa, seething like a malevolent cat.

"Nattie will do the show after all," Ermise said. "I have to put her back in, Gay."

I couldn't speak at first; sick, quivering on my feet with that horrible end-of-the-rope hollowness in my stomach. No place to go from here. No place....

"When we pulled her name off the advertising, we lost more than a third of our reservations." Erm snorted. "I don't like it. I don't like her right now, but she's the only thing'll keep my theater open."

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Bill's comment cut with the hard edge of disgust. "You know what this does to the cast, don't you? They've readjusted once. Now they have to do it again and open in two days. They were an ensemble with Gayla. Now they're the tail of a star vehicle."

Bill knew it was already lost, but he was doing this for me.

Ermise shook her head. "Gay, honey, I can't afford it, but I'm gonna raise you retroactive to the first week of your contract." Her hands fluttered in an uncharacteristically helpless gesture. "I owe you that. And you'll go back in as Eunice. But next season—"

I found my voice. It was strange, old. "Don't do this to me. This role, it's mine, I earned it. She'll ruin it."

"Don't look at me," Bill snapped to Ermise. "She's right."

Ermise went defensive. "I don't care who's right. You're all for Gay. Fine, but I can't run a theater that way. Lucky to break even as it is. Nattie's back, she plays, and that's the end of it. Gay's contract reads 'as cast.' She's Eunice. What else can I say?"

I showed her what else. I ripped the *Streetcar* script in four parts and threw them in the fireplace. "You can say good-by, Ermise. Then you can take your raise and shove it." I was already lurching toward the door, voice breaking. "Then you can put someone in my roles, because I'm leaving."

I meant it. Without Blanche, there was no reason to stay another minute. Finished. Done.

Except for Natalie Bond. I found her in her hotel room, already dressed for rehearsal and running over the script.

"Come on in, Gayla. Drink?"

"No."

She read my tension as I crouched with my back against the door. "All right, hon. Get it off your chest."

"I will."

I told the bitch what I felt and what I thought and didn't leave anything out. It was quite a speech for no rehearsal, beginning with my teens when I first knew I had to play Blanche, and the years and hard work that made me worthy of it. There wasn't a rep company in the east I hadn't worked, or a major role from Rosalind to Saint Joan I hadn't played. To walk out on the show like she did was pure shit. To crawl back was worse.

"Right," said Nattie. She faced me all through it, let me get it all out. I was crying when I finished. I sank down on a chair, grabbing for one of her kleenex.

"Now do you want a drink?"

"Yes, what the hell."

She wasn't all rat, Nattie. She could have put me down with the star routine, but she fixed me a stiff gin and soda without a word. I remember her fixing that drink: thick glasses and no make up, gristly thin. She had endless trouble with her uterus, infection after painful infection and a work schedule that never allowed her to heal properly. A hysterectomy ended the whole

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thing. Nattie's face was thinner than mine, all the softness gone, mouth and cheeks drawn tight. No matter how sincere, the smile couldn't unclench.

And this, I thought, is what I want to be? Help me, Nick. Take me home. There's gotta be a home somewhere, a little rest.

"Know what we're like?" Nattie mused. "A little fish swimming away from a big, hungry fish who's just about to be eaten by a bigger fish. That's us, honey. And that's me in the middle."

She screwed Ermise, but someone shafted her too. The picture deal was a big fat fake. The producer wanted someone a little bigger and hustled Nattie very plausibly to scare the lady into reaching for a pen.

"I'm broke, Gayla. I owe forty thousand in back taxes, my house is on a second mortgage, and my kids' tuition is overdue. Those kids are all I have. I don't know where the hell to go from here, but Ermise needs me and I sure as hell need the job."

While I huddled over my drink, unable to speak, Nattie scribbled something on a memo pad.

"You're too good to waste, you're not commercial, and you'll probably die broke. But I saw your rehearsal this morning."

I looked up at her in weepy surprise. The smile wasn't quite so hard just then.

"If I can do it half that well, Gay. Half."

She shoved the paper into my hand. "That's my agent in New York. He's with William Morris. If he can't get you work, no one can. I'll call him myself." She glanced at her dressing table clock. "Time, gotta run."

Nattie divined the finality in my shoulders as I sagged toward the door. "You going to play Eunice?"

"No. I'm leaving."

Pinning her hair, she shot me a swift, unsmiling appraisal through the mirror. "Good for you. You got a man in New York?"

"Yeah."

"Get married," she mumbled through a mouthful of pins. "It's not worth it." As the door closed, she raised her voice. "But call my agent."

My bags were packed, but I hadn't bothered to change clothes. That's why my permanent costume, I suppose. Who knew then I'd get very tired of black. Bill insisted on driving me to the airport. When he came for me, I must have looked pathetic, curled up on the bed in one more temporary, damp summer room just waiting to eject me. No love lost; I got damned sick of yellow-green wallpaper.

Bill sat on the edge of the bed. "Ready, love?"

I didn't move or answer. Done, finished. Bill put aside the old hurt and lay down beside me, bringing me into his arms. I guess something in him had to open inspite of his defenses. He

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opened my heart gently as a baby's hand clutched around something that might harm it, letting me cry the last of it out against his shoulder. The light faded in the room while we lay together.

We kissed good-by like lovers at the departure gate. Bill was too much a part of me for anything less. Maybe he knew better than I how little was waiting for me.

"Be good, Gay."

"You too." I fiddled with his collar. "Don't forget to take your vitamins, you need them. Call me when you get back."

He hugged me one last time. "Why don't you marry me sometime?"

For a lot of reasons, Bill. Because I was a fool and something of a coward. The stunting begins in the seed when we learn not to like ourselves. The sad thing about life is that we usually get what we really want. Let it be.

Funny, though: that was my first and last proposal, and I kissed him goodby, walked out of his life, and four hours later I was dead.

There was time on the plane to get some of it together. Natalie was a star, at the top where I wanted to be, and look at her: most of the woman cut out of her, flogged to work not by ambition but need. Driven and used. She reminded me of a legless circus freak propelling herself on huge, overdeveloped arms, the rest of her a pitiful afterthought cared for by an expensive gynecologist. I thought: at least when I get home there'll be Nick. Don't call him from the airport; let it be a surprise. We'll get some coffee and cold-cuts, make love and talk half the night. I needed to talk, to see us plain.

Get married, Nattie said. It isn't worth it.

Maybe not the way I chased it for fourteen years. I'd call her agent, keep working, but more New York jobs with time left over to be with Nick, to sit on my balcony and just breathe or read. To make a few friends outside of theater. To see a doctor and find out how tough I really am, and if everything in the baby box is working right, so that maybe—

Like she said, so maybe get married and have kids while I can. A little commitment, Nick, a little tomorrow. If the word sounds strange, I just learned it. Give me this, Nick. I need it.

The light was on in our living room as I hauled my suitcase out of the cab and started up. Hell, I won't even buzz, just turn the key in the lock and reach for him.

I did that.

There was — yes, I remember — one blessed moment of breathing the good, safe air of my own living room as I set down the luggage. I heard a faint stirring from the bedroom. Good, I've surprised him. If Nick was just waking from a nap, we'd have that much more time to touch each other.

"It's me, baby."

I crossed to the bedroom door, groping inside for the light switch. "I'm home."

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I didn't need the switch. There was enough light to see them frozen on the torn-up bed. The other one was older, a little flabby. He muttered something to Nick. I stood there, absurd myself, and choked: "Excuse me."

Then, as if someone punched me in the stomach, I stumbled to the bathroom, pushed the door shut and fell back against it.

"Get him out of here, Nick!"

The last word strangled off as I doubled over the john and vomited all the horrible day out of me, with two hours left to live, retching and sobbing, not wanting to hear whatever was said beyond the door. After a short time, the front door closed. I washed my face, dried it with the stiff, clumsy movements of exhaustion, and got out to the living room somehow, past the bed where Nick was smoking a cigarette, the sheet pulled up over his lean thighs.

I remember pouring a drink. That was foolish on an empty stomach, the worst thing anyone could have done. I sat on the sofa, waiting.

"Nick." The silence from the bedroom was the only thing I could feel in my shock. "Nick, please come out. I want to talk to you."

I heard him rustle into his clothes. In a moment Nick came out, bleak and sullen.

"Why are you back so early?"

"No, they—" My reactions were still disjointed, coming out of shock, but the anger was building. "They put Nattie Bond back in the show. I walked out."

That seemed to concern him more than anything else. "You just walked out? They'll get Equity on you."

"Never mind about Equity, what are *we* gonna do?"

"What do you mean?" he asked calmly.

"Oh, man, are you for real?" I pointed at the door. "What was that?"

"That may be a Broadway job." He turned away into the kitchen. "Now get off my back."

"The hell I—"

"Hey look, Gayla. I haven't made any promises to you. You wanted me to move in. Okay, I moved in. We've had it good."

I began to shake. "Promises? Of course there were promises. There's always a promise, nobody has to spell it out. I could have gone to bed with Bill Wrenn plenty of times this summer, but I didn't."

He only shrugged. "So whose fault is that? Not mine."

"You bastard!" I threw my glass at him. He ducked, the thing went a mile wide, then Nick was sopping up whisky and bits of glass while I shook myself apart on the couch, teeth chattering so hard I had to clamp my mouth tight shut. It was all hitting me at once, and I couldn't handle half of it. Nick finished cleaning up without a word, but I could see even then the tight line of his mouth and the angry droop of his eyelids. He had guts of a kind,

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Nick. He could face anything because it didn't matter. All the important things were outside, to be reached for. Inside I think he was dead.

"The meanest thing Bill ever said to me," I stuttered. "When I left him for you, h-he said you played both sides of the fence. And I c-called him a goddamn liar. I couldn't believe he'd be small enough to — Nick, I'm falling apart. They took my show, and I came home to you because I don't know what to do."

Nick came over, sat down and held me in his arms. "I'm not, Gayla."

"Not what?"

"What Bill said."

"Then w-what was this?"

He didn't answer, just kissed me. I clung to Nick like a lost child.

Why do we always try to rewrite what's happened? Even now I see myself pointing to the door and kissing him off with a real Bette Davis sizzler for a curtain. Bullshit. I needed Nick. The accounting department was already toting up the cost of what I wanted and saying: *I'll change him. It's worth it.*

I only cried wearily in his arms while Nick soothed and stroked me. "I'm not that," he said again. "Just that so many guys are hung up on role-playing and all that shit. Oh, it's been said about me."

I twisted in his lap to look at him. "Nick, why did you come to me?"

The question gave him more trouble than it should. "I like you. You're the greatest girl I ever met."

Something didn't add up. Nothing ever bugged Nick before; he could always handle it, but he was finding this hard.

"That's not enough," I persisted. "Not tonight."

Nick disengaged himself with a bored sigh. "Look, I have to go out."

"Go out? Now?" I couldn't believe he'd leave me like this. "Why?"

He walked away toward the bedroom. I felt the anger grow cold with something I'd never faced before, answers to questions that gnawed at the back of my mind from our first night. "Why, Nick? Is it him? Did that fat queer tell you to come over after you ditched the hag?"

Nick turned on me, lowering. "I don't like that word."

"Queer."

"I said—"

"Queer."

"All right." He kicked viciously at the bedroom door with all the force he wanted to spend stopping my mouth. "It's a fact in this business. That's why I get in places you don't. It's a business, cut and dried, not an *aht fawm* like you're always preaching."

"Come off it, Nick." I stood up, ready for him and wanting the fight. "That casting couch bit went out with Harlow. Is that how you get jobs? That, and the cheap, scene-stealing tricks you use when you know and I know I played you against the wall in Lexington, you hypocritical son of a bitch."

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Nick threw up a warning hand. "Hey, wait just one damn minute, Bernhardt. I never said I was or ever could be as good as you. But I'll tell you one thing." Nick opened the closet and snaked his jacket off a hanger. "I'll be around and working when nobody remembers you, because I know the business. You've been around fourteen years and still don't know the score. You won't make rounds, you don't want to be bothered waiting for an agent to see you. You're a goddamn *ahtist*. You won't wait in New York for something to develop, hell no. You'll take any show going out to Noplaceville, and who the hell ever sees you but some jerkoff writing for a newspaper no one reads. Integrity? Bullshit, lady. You are *afraid* of New York, afraid to take a chance on it."

Nick subsided a little. "That guy who was here, he produces. He's got a big voice where it counts." Again he looked away with that odd, inconsistent embarrassment. "He didn't want to sleep with me, really. He's basically straight."

That was too absurd for anger. "Basically?"

"He only wanted a little affection."

"And you, Nick. Which way do you go basically. I mean was it his idea or yours?"

That was the first totally vulnerable moment I ever saw in Nick. He turned away, leaning against the sink. I could barely hear him. "I don't know. It's never made much difference. So what's the harm? I don't lose anything, and I may gain."

He started for the door, but I stopped him. "Nick, I need you. What's happpened to me today, I'm almost sick. Please don't do this to me."

"Do what? Look." He held me a moment without warmth or conviction. "I'll only be gone a little while. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

"Don't go, Nick."

He straightened his collar carefully with a sidelong glance at the mirror. "We can't talk when you're like this. There's no point."

I dogged him desperately, needing something to hang onto. "Please don't go. I'm sorry for what I said. Nick, we can work it out, but don't leave me alone."

"I have to." His hand was already on the door, cutting me off like a thread hanging from his sleeve.

"Why!" It ripped up out of the bottom, out of the hate without which we never love or possess anything. "Because that fat faggot with his job means more than I do, right? How low do you crawl to make a buck in this business? Or is it all business? Jesus, you make me sick."

Nick couldn't be insulted. Even at the end, he didn't have that to spare me. Just a look from those cool blue eyes I tried so hard to please, telling me he was a winner in a game he knew, and I just didn't make it.

"It's your apartment. I'll move."

"Nick, don't go."

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The door closed.

What did I do then? I should remember, they were the last minutes of my life. The door closed. I heard Nick thumping down the carpeted stairs, and thank God for cold comfort I didn't run after him. I poured a straight shot and finished it in one pull.

A hollow, eye-of-the-storm calm settled on me and then a depression so heavy it was a physical pain. I wandered through the apartment drinking too much and too fast, talking to Nick, to Bill, to Nattie, until I collapsed, clumsy, hiccuping drunk on the floor with half an hour to live.

Another drink. Get blind, drunk enough to reach ... something, to blot out the Lump. Yeah, she's still with you, the goddamn little loser. Don't you ever learn, loser? No, she won't ever learn. Yesterday did this day's madness prepare. What play was that and who cares?

I tried to think but nothing came together. My life was a scattered tinkertoy, all joints and pieces without meaning or order. A sum of apples and oranges: parts played, meals eaten, clothes worn, he said and I said, old tickets, old programs, newspaper reviews yellowed and fragile as Blanche's love letters. Apples and oranges. Where did I leave anything of myself, who did I love, what did I have? No one. Nothing.

Only Bill Wrenn.

"Christ, Bill, help me!"

I clawed for the phone with the room spinning and managed to call the theater. One of the girl apprentices answered. I struggled to make myself understood with a thickening tongue. "Yeah, Bill Wrenn, 'simportant. Gayla Damon. Yeah, hi, honey. He's not? Goddamnit, he's gotta be. I *need* him. When'll he be back? Yeah ... yeah. Tell'm call Gayla, please. Please. Yeah, trouble. Real trouble. I need him."

That's how it happened. I dropped the phone in the general vicinity of the hook and staggered to the pitching sink to make one more huge, suicidal drink, crying and laughing, part drunk, part hysteria. But Bill was going to bail me out like he always had, and, boy, ol' Gay had learned her lesson. I was a fool to leave him. He loved me. Bill loved me and I was afraid of that. Afraid to be loved. How dumb can you get?

"How dumb?" I raged mushily at the Lump in the mirror. "You with the great, soulful eyes. You never knew shit, baby."

I was sweating. The wool sweater oppressed my clammy skin. Some sober molecule said take it off, but no. It's cooler out on my balcony. I will go out on my beautiful, nighted balcony and present my case to the yet unknowing world.

I half fell through the door. The balcony had a low railing, lower than I judged as I stumbled and heaved my drunken weight behind the hand flung out to steady myself and—

Fell. No more time.

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That's it, finished. Now I've remembered. It was that sudden, painless, meaningless. No fade out, no end title music resolving the conflict themes, only torn film fluttering past the projector light, leaving a white screen.

There's a few answers anyway. I could get a lump in my throat, if I had one, thinking how Bill came and checked me out. God, let's hope they kept me covered. I must have looked awful. Poor Bill; maybe I gave you such a rotten time because I knew you could take it and still hang in. That's one of the faces of love, Mister Wrenn.

But I'd never have guessed about Lowen. Just imagine: he saw me that long ago and remembered all these years because I showed him he wasn't alone. I still can't add it up. Apples and oranges.

Unless, just maybe....

"Lowen!"

The sound track again, the needle dropped on time. The balcony door thunders open and slams shut. Al calls again, but Lowen ignores her, leaning against the door, holding it closed.

"Gayla?"

His eyes move searchingly over the balcony in the darkening winter afternoon. From my name etched in the cement, around the railing, Lowen's whole concentrated being probes the gray light and air, full of purpose and need.

"Gayla, I know you're here."

As he says my name, sound and vision and my own strength treble. I turn to him, wondering if through the sheer power of his need he can see me yet.

Lowen, can you hear me?

"I think I know what this means."

I stretch out my hand, open up, let it touch his face, and as I tingle and hurt with it, Lowen turns his cheek into the caress.

"Yes, I feel you close."

Talk to me, love.

"Isn't it strange, Gayla?"

Not strange at all, not us.

"When I saw you that night, I wanted to reach out and touch you, but I was just too shy. Couldn't even ask for my own autograph."

Why not? I could have used a little touching.

"But I hitched all the way from school next day just to catch a glimpse of you. Hid in the back of the theater and watched you rehearse."

That was Blanche. You saw that?

"It was the same thing all over again. You had something that reached out and showed me how we're all alike. I never saw a lonelier person than you on that stage. Or more beautiful. I cried."

You saw Blanche. She did have a beauty.

"Oh, Gayla, the letters I wrote you and never sent. Forgive me. I forgot the name but not the lesson. If you hear me: you were the first woman I ever loved, and you taught me right. It's a giving."

I can hear Al's urgent knock on the

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other side of the door. "Lowen, what is it? Are you all right?"

He turns his head and smiles. God, he's beautiful. "Fine, Al. She loves this place, Gayla. Don't drive her away."

I won't, but don't go. Now when I'm beginning to understand so much.

He shakes his head. "This is our first house. We're new, all kinds of problems. Parents, religion, everything."

Can you *hear* me?

"We were never loved by anyone before, either of us. That's new, too. You pray for it—"

Like a fire:

"—like a fire to warm yourself."

You do hear me.

"But it's scary. What do you do with the fire when it comes?" Lowen's hands reach out, pleading. "Don't take this away from her. Don't hurt my Al. You're stronger than us. You can manage."

I stretch my hand to touch his. With all my will, I press the answer through the contact.

Promise, Lowen.

"Don't make me shut you out, I don't know if I could. Go away and keep our secret? Take a big piece of love with you?"

Yes. Just that I was reaching for something, like you, and I had it all the time. So do you, Lowen. You're a—

I feel again as I did when the star fell across the sky, joyful and new and big as all creation without needing a reason, as Lowen's real fingers close around the memory of mine.

You're a *mensche*, love. Like me.

Lowen murmurs: "I feel your hand. I don't care what anyone says. Your kind of woman doesn't kill herself. I'll never believe it."

Bet on it. And thank you.

So it was a hell of a lot more than apples and oranges. It was a giving, a love. Hear that, Bill? Nattie? What I called life was just the love, the giving, like kisses on the wind, thrown to the audience, to my work, to the casual men, to whom it may concern. I was a giver, and if the little takers like Nick couldn't dig that, tough. That's the way it went down. All the miserable, self-cheating years, something heard music and went on singing. If Nattie could do it half as well. If she was half as alive as me, she meant. I loved all my life, because they're the same thing. Man, I was beautiful.

That's the part of you that woke me, Lowen. You're green, but you won't go through life like a tourist. You're going to get hurt and do some hurting yourself, but maybe someday....

That's it, Lowen. That's the plot. You said it: we all touch, and the touching continues us. All those nights, throwing all of myself at life, and who's to say I did it alone?

So when you're full up with life, maybe you'll wake like me to spill it over into some poor, scared guy or girl. You're full of life like me, Lowen. It's a beautiful, rare gift.

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It's dark enough now to see stars and the fingernail sliver of moon. A lovely moment for Lowen and me, like a night with Bill a moment before we made love for the first time. Lowen and I holding hands in the evening. Understanding. His eyes move slowly from my hand up, up toward my face.

"Gayla, I can see you."

Can you, honest?

"Very clear. You're wearing a sweater and jeans. And you're smiling."

Am I ever!

"And very beautiful."

Bet your ass, love. I feel great, like I finally got it together.

One last painful, lovely current of life as Lowen squeezes my hand. "Good-by, Gayla."

So long, love.

Lowen yanks open the door. "Al, Mister Hirajian? Come on out. It's a lovely evening."

Alice peeks out to see Lowen leaning over the railing, enjoying the river and the early stars. His chest swells; he's laughing and he looks marvelous, inviting Al into his arms the way he did on their first day here. She comes unsurely to nestle in beside him, one arm around his waist. "Who were you talking to?"

"She's gone, Al. You've got nothing to be afraid of. Except being afraid."

"Lowen, I'm not going to—"

"This is our house, and nobody's going to take it away from us." He turns Al to him and kisses her. "Nobody wants to, that's a promise. So don't run away from it or yourself."

She shivers a little, still uncertain. "Do you really think we can stay. I can't—"

"Hey, love." Lowen leans into her, cocky and charming, but meaning it. "Don't tell a *mensche* what you can't. Hey, Hirajian."

When the little prune pokes his head out the door, Lowen sweeps his arm out over the river and the whole lit-up West Side. "Sorry for all the trouble, but we've changed our minds. I mean, look at it! Who could give up a balcony with a view like this?"

He's the last thing I see before the lights change: Lowen holding Al and grinning out at the world. I thought the lights were dimming, but it's something else, another cue coming up. The lights cross-fade up, up, more pink and amber, until — my God, it's gorgeous!

I'm not dead, not gone. I feel more alive than ever. I'm Gail and Gayla and Lowen and Bill and Al and all of them magnified, heightened, fully realized, flowing together like bright, silver streams into—

Will you look at that *set*. Fantastic. Who's on the lights?

So that's what You look like. Ri-i-ght. I'm with it now, and I love You too. Give me a follow-spot, Baby.

I'm on.

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Charles Grant's new story concerns a man who takes the death of his wife so hard that his friends are seriously worried about him — with good reason....

Every Time You Say I Love You

BY

CHARLES L. GRANT

The sunset bled from shades of blood to shades of dying. What few birds nested in the backyard elms were silent, leaving the nightvoice to tree frogs and passing cars and the frantic muffled beating of a moth against the kitchen's screen door. Ken watched until he thought he heard it screaming, turned away and reached for the bottle in the middle of the table. There was barely enough bourbon left to cover the bottom of the glass. He stared at it bleakly. The effort required to lift and pour, lift and swallow, outweighed by the effect of weary consideration.

A look to the passageway, long and dark and webbed with whispers, stretching through the house to the front door. A look to the white-faced, round-faced, faintly dusty clock over the stove. A look to his hands clutched and quivering at his stomach.

It would work, he told himself sternly; it would work, it would work. Litany. Ritual. It would work, damnit, it would work. Litany. Ritual. Please let it work.

He had to be sure. He had to make himself feel sure. This time it would work, and he could come back inside when it was done, and Louise would be standing at the refrigerator, smiling at him, handing him a slice of bologna or a wedge of Boston cream pie while she licked her fingers with feigned and laughing guilt; he would come back inside and she would be sitting at the table with a glass of cream sherry in her hands and talking about excessive violence in hockey while in the same breath she threatened various of his clients with personal castration if they didn't pay up; he would come back inside and Louise would be there. There. Just ... there.

It would work. Please let it work.

The moth rested, was startled by the clicking approach of a nightbeetle,

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and vanished.

Ken was alone.

He shuddered as a way to rid himself of doubt. Took several deep breaths to keep the ice from his blood. Then he put his palms to his cheeks, his fingers shoved into the brown sweep of his hair. Slowly — a year, two, three — he lowered his elbows to the grey tabletop and rested. Five minutes later he began to weep over the empty, still warm glass.

It began as a fleck of soot behind his eyes. He blinked rapidly, hard, his throat constricted, his tongue pressed against the back of clenched teeth. (Lou; think of Lou) Another deep breath held, held, whistled silently between his lups. (Lou) (lou) The sound of someone stirring fitfully in troubled sleep. A choking. The blinking. An explosion of groans that scaled high into whimpers.

And he wept.

For ten minutes. For fifteen. His hands against his cheeks, the tears sweeping from his chin and into the glass.

And when he was done, shivering and sighing, he wiped his face quickly with a sleeve and cupped the glass in his hands. The tears filled the bottom. He rose unsteadily. He waited for balance. He hurried outside and down the porch steps. There was an oval garden on the left, but he ignored it in the dark; there was a gazebo moonlight prim on the right, but he refused to see it as the place where he loved her on summer nights like this. Instead, he moved as swiftly as he dared without running, the glass catching shards of light, the grass hissing wetly beneath his soles. The cherry tree was straight ahead. Lou's tree. Planted when they were first married, grown to strew pink, to shed white whenever spring let loose the wind.

Let it work. (lou)

And he tripped over a rake buried in the tall grass. He cried out enraged anguish and fell to his knees. The glass jumped from his hands, arced, mocked, fell and shatterd. The tears vanished instantly and Ken Morgan screamed.

Just before midnight a hand feathered to his shoulder. He didn't feel it at first, then tried to shrug it off. It gripped, massaged, and he felt more than heard someone kneeling awkwardly beside him.

"Ken?"

He had been beyond thinking, feeling only the press of the night.

"Ken, a neighbor — that old guy over there — he called me. He thought you were being murdered or something."

He kept asking himself what the hell he had to do, what the hell it would take. Oh, Lou — god, I'm sorry. I had the tears and everything and I blew it. I blew it.

"Come on, Ken, it's getting chilly. Come on. You'll be all right. Come on, come on." Both shoulders taken now,

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strength pulling him to his feet. "Let's go inside, pal, there's nothing out here."

Hell, he thought wearily, I've blown it again. And once inside he stumbled to the sink and ran cold water from the tap, splashing it against his face until he was able to smile without it seeming rictus. The flesh tightened across his cheeks, his eyes no longer burned. He turned the faucet off and glanced up at the clock. Maybe I had the time wrong. He shrugged, turned, regarded his friend smiling.

Walter Trace was heavy, slipping into rotund, his hair blond, close to white and brushed straight back behind his ears. He wore a plaid shirt, creased trousers, slippers on his feet to indicate his haste. Abbott and Costello, Ken thought as he used a coarse paper towel to dry his face and hands; he knew that's what the rest of the office called them, not in derision but in good-natured awe of the way they complemented each other in the firm, and in the courtroom.

"You all right now?"

He nodded, tossed the wadded towel into the sink and took the chair opposite Trace. "Actually," he said, "I feel like an idiot."

"You should." Trace's voice was pitched high, almost whining. "Damnit, Ken!" He left hand pounded the table once. "Damnit, what the hell were you doing out there this time, sacrificing goats?"

Indignation was swallowed with difficulty behind a harsh rubbing of his face. Composure, he cautioned; composure, or you'll kill him. "I deserve that, I guess."

"Damn right."

"What I was doing .... " He sniffed, tugged idly at an earlobe. "Well, see, I read this story about — "

Trace groaned and reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

" — this guy who brought his lover back with tears. In a glass. He had to collect them, see. It was British, I think." He shrugged. "Hell, I've tried everything else, you know?"

"No shit," said Trace. His voice lowered. "Ken, I'm afraid I can't cover for you anymore. And ... hell, I'm afraid."

"Not of me!"

"No, for you. Lord, you'd think the way you've been acting you were the only man in the world whose wife ... nuts. Nuts, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Ken, there was no call for that."

He held up a palm. "Don't be. It's okay. You'd be as crazy as I am if you didn't care. As a matter of fact, I'd be worried if you weren't. Caring, that is."

A minute died in silence. Not quite awkward, not quite comfortable. Ken wished his friend would leave him. Now. He needed to be alone. He needed Lou, he needed her badly. But Trace only leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs under his belt. The cigarette lay burning acridly in a saucer between them.

"I've told everyone in the office

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you'd be in on Monday."

Ken bridled, inhaled, hissed out control. "You're determined, I'll say that."

"I'm your friend, damnit, for one thing. For another, we need you downtown."

"I'm not indispensable."

"No," Trace agreed without flinching, "but we make more money when you're there than when you're not." He grinned to ease the sting. "Now look, I want you to listen to me, Ken. When Louise died — "

"Was killed," he corrected softly.

" — we were more than willing to give you plenty of room, to accommodate you, make sure you were okay. I mean, hell, you know what I mean. But, Ken, the time's up. At least they think so, and they're still the senior partners, not us, not yet." He waited, but Ken only examined the clasp of his hands. "And I want you to stop all this other crap, too."

"I love her."

"A lot of men love their wives, Ken. But as far as I know, not one of them, not a single one of them has tried to bring them back from the dead." He sliced at the air to forestall interruption. "Sure they find the loss hard to take, who wouldn't? But, Ken, they accept it. Time passes and they accept it. They have to or it's all over for them. Maybe the pain never really goes completely away, I don't know. And to tell you the truth, I'd just as soon not. All I can say is, we've supported you, we've backed you, and now you have to snap out of it. If you don't — good god, they'll be coming after you with nets, for god's sake."

Ken listened, heard, tried to decide what the right things were to say.

"Ken, please." Trace reached across the table and grabbed hold of his wrists. "Please." His face creased with concern. "You know," he said, releasing him and leaning back again, "I once thought this stuff you'd gotten into would do you some good. Help you work it all out somehow. It hasn't. I mean, I guess there are some guys who think about what you're doing, but that's all they do, Ken. Think about it. They don't .... "

Ken didn't need to follow the catalogue Trace spread before him. The cat, the bird, the doll, the chanting, the strips of oak bark, the weavings of dead grass — these were what Trace knew about, all Ken had told him. Trace hadn't heard, however, about the blood of a child, the seed of a bull, the head of a serpent, the hair of a corpse. He also didn't know about the prayers that had been uncovered, the symbolic rites, the midnight rituals, the dawn prostrations. If Trace had ever guessed at the truth, he might not be so eager to rush over whenever someone complained about the widower in the yard.

Maybe he was right. It *was* getting dangerous. The next time out, the old man might even call the police.

" — at nine o'clock." Trace stood.

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"If you're not there, Ken, I don't know what .... " He finished with a helpless, hand-washing shrug.

Ken nodded his understanding, took the man's arm lightly and guided him down the passageway toward the front door. "No problem," he said. "And I'll be all right. I guess all I needed was tonight." He grinned sheepishly. "You can count on me again, Walter. I'll be there Monday morning, first thing, with bells on."

Trace looked at him somewhat doubtfully, struggled before putting his hand to Ken's shoulder. "We've known each other for a long time, pal. We go a long way back. Not many men at forty can say that these days." Ken was afraid the man was going to cry. " I still have the number of that shrink, you know. It's no disgrace anymore. See him. Come back to us whole." He embraced Ken quickly, swallowed hard and left.

Ken waited at the threshold until the taillights were swallowed by the curve of the drive. Then he closed the door slowly and leaned his weight against it. No two ways about it, the man was right. He was calling too much unwanted attention to himself with all this mad behavior, and there was no profit left in blaming it on grief. If he continued to do so, that shrink might become mandatory and he would have a hell of a time breaking free again.

The trouble was, Lou had been a woman whose intense hold on her living had affected nearly everyone around her. Each of the seasons had vibrated with her presence, each of her embraces more joyful than the last. She had created their twenty-year marriage out of laughter, their house out of love, had nudged his career along without him minding at all. He had had no idea how much he had used her simply for breathing until the afternoon that camper had jumped the curb downtown and pinned her against the wall. Pinned her. Like a butterfly. Arms/wings flailing, weaker, weaker, until red slipped from her mouth and took her life with it.

Even now he couldn't remember (didn't want to remember) the police talking with him, the man who had driven the vehicle weeping over his guilt. And the funeral — grey figures, black figures, a brilliant spring afternoon, no rain whatsoever, not a cloud in the sky. Children playing in yards as the cortege passed by. Dogs snapping at the wheels of the slow-moving hearse. A baseball game in a sandlot. Sun. Blue. Flowers. The cherry tree blossoming as if she hadn't left at all.

And she hadn't.

Grief had been immersion in freezing clear water. Once accustomed, it settled, flowed, became a part of him, became his reason. He had almost decided he was ready for work when he'd read about a woman who had robbed her child's grave because she wanted to perform some voodoo rites on the body. Ken sympathized. Emphathized.

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Went to bed that night and dreamt of Lou and her lips and her arms and the smile that provided lanterns through every phase of night.

He told himself he was crazy, but he robbed her grave anyway. Opened the coffin. Took her home.

It was a hell of a big house, and, my god, he was lonely.

The magic began. Or the attempts to create it. And he wondered as he climbed the stairs if perhaps he didn't believe in it enough. If a part of his soul was still telling him he was crazy. Something was missing for sure, something vital in the process. Lou still wasn't the same as she had been when alive, and he couldn't figure out what the hell he was doing wrong.

He stood on the threshold of the bedroom and stared sorrowfully at their bed. Listened to the sounds of the house sighing down around him. Then he crossed the thick carpeting to sit on the mattress. Stretched, then began to take off his shoes.

"I'm sorry," he said. He hadn't turned on the light.

Socks. Shirt. Trousers. Scratching at his chest, his groin, over his thighs to the curve of his knees.

"Honest to god, I don't know what else to do."

He rubbed his hair vigorously, then combed it back with his fingers.

"Walter says I have to go back to work. There'll be hell to pay if I don't. And I can't really argue with him. I can't keep this big house unless I start bringing in the checks again."

Naked now he stretched, yawned, rose and folded back the quilt and the crisp brown sheet. Patted the arrangement and went into the bathroom. Showered, used the toilet, brushed his teeth, brushed his hair. Back into the bedroom. The drawn shades refused the moonlight entry, but he knew his way blind to the far paneled wall.

"Hell, there's still lots of things left, though, you know. I just have to be more careful from now on, that's all. Some of the things you need are kind of hard to get. Like bodies. I don't

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know. The kid was easy, but I don't know ...."

He exercised for half an hour, lay on the carpet for five minutes to feel the warmth spread over his limbs.

"But I don't want you to think I'm going to give up. I'm not. Lord, there's still so much left to do!"

He rose agilely and pressed a stud that slid back the bookcase. A gleaming steel door with a combination lock. He worked it easily, not hurrying, not eager, gripped the double latch and yanked down, pulling the door toward him. He stiffened, then, as he had done every night for the past month, half expecting the circulation fans to have stopped working somehow. But everything was all right. The scent of lilac engulfed him.

"You know," he said, "every time you say I love you, I have to think of Walter. He always loved you. Always. He was jealous as hell when we were married. Even now I think he dreams about you." He laughed, almost a giggle. "I think that's why he never married. And, you know, I just thought of something. If he ... if I can find out just how much he still loves you, maybe ... just maybe he'll make a good prospect."

He fumbled for the light switch.

"Lou, can you hear me?" He listened to the fans, smelled the lilac, felt the warmth. "Maybe Walter will be the key. It would be damned ironic, but maybe he can bring you back. God knows we've tried everything else."

He hesitated. Waiting.

"I hope so," Lou said. Lovingly. Sweetly. Softly. Intensely. "I'm getting tired of this room."

He wanted to weep for her courage. Instead, he braved a smile and turned on the light.

"God, Louise, I love you!"

The grey, the red, the black-and-yellow, the scarlet, the purple ... the mass of sludge on the floor rippled and stirred.

"Oh, Ken," it whispered, "turn off the light and love me."

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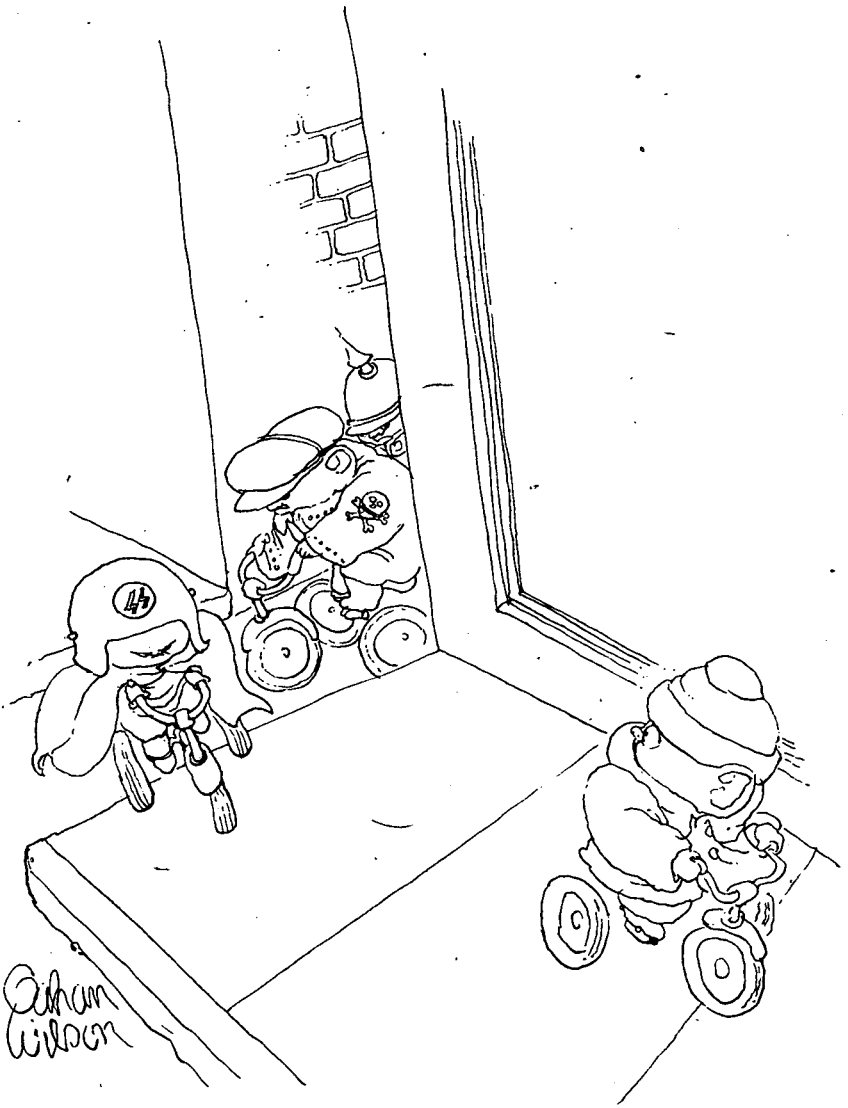

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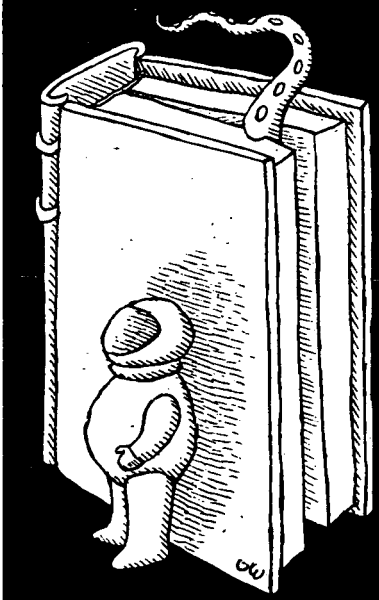

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Snow Queen, Joan D. Vinge, The Dial Press, $10.95

City of Baraboo, Barry B. Longyear, Berkley/Putnam, $10.95

Ascendancies, D.G. Compton, Berkley/Putnam, $12.95

The Artificial Kid, Bruce Sterling, Harper & Row, $10.95

Here is Joan Vinge describing the craft of writing science fiction, on page 82 of *The Snow Queen:*

> "...the craft is hereditary in the Ravenglass family, you know; like blindness. Being born blind, and then being given half-sight — sometimes I think that combination creates a heightening of imagination. All forms are vague and wonderful ... you see in them what you want to see. I have two sisters who are both blind too, and who have their own shops here in the city. And many other relatives as well, all doing the same, though not all blind. It takes a lot of creative energy to make certain that there's a mask for every reveler...."

This passage is of course taken from its context, where it is spoken by a character, but it nonetheless stands as a kind of defense for novels like *The Snow Queen*. The science fiction world has many of the characteristics of a family; its forms are often vague and wonderful, and much can be read into them if desired; in today's large market it does indeed require a lot of creative energy to provide the diversity of readers, or revelers, with what they want. But the part of the passage which caught my attention was the

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idea that a disability — the "blindness" — could enhance the imagination. There's a truth in this we can recognize instinctively: that within a discipline of one sort a freedom of another can emerge. It reminded me of something said recently by a French author, who had been forced to write for once in English. She discovered that because her vocabulary in English was restricted, this removed any freedom to *choose* words, and as a result the ideas came thick and fast and her imagination was liberated.

In literary terms too, there is a "blindness" in science fiction. It is a form which has been traditionally crafted with honest toil rather than created with literary art. It is *well told* more often than it is *well written*.

This is not altogether to be despised. Science fiction, with plot and event-narration well to the fore, contains much work that we can claim as having lasting value. It has a lot in common with the writing of narrative artists like Graham Greene and John Fowles, yet, in general, science fiction writers have neither the literary standing nor the sales-potential of those writers; instead, sf has somehow become identified with the lower orders of narrative craft, the Alistair Macleans, the Arthur Haileys, and in *still* not getting the sales misses out yet again on literary respectability. Falling in with the wrong company is always something to rue, but it does not diminish the principle that a good story, strongly told, is at the core of virtually every great novel.

When we come across the storyteller's craft, we gain insights into the author's mind. Imagination runs free; forms vague and wonderful appear. But to see into the author's heart we need to find good writing as well. When we learn what insights the writer has into people, when we discover what the writer can do with the meaning and texture of language, when we feel the subtlety of the writer's meaning, feel the force of emotion or conscience or reason, then we can start to make the distinction between a good writer and a great one, between a competent novel and an inspired one.

It is a partial measure of Vinge's *The Snow Queen* that a review of it can be prefaced with this sort of distinction. The publishers are promoting it heavily, and the now-customary peer endorsements (in this case from Clarke, McCaffrey, Sturgeon and Zelazny) do not shrink from adulatory adjectives. Perhaps more significantly, the book seems set fair to be popular; it is one of those novels which come along at exactly the right time, fulfilling the expectations of a large number of readers. We are in the presence (as the publishers claim) of a successor to *Dune* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

However, comparisons are odious, and it is not fair to belabor the author with them, nor with the claims of her publishers and admirers, nor even with the vicissitudes of science fiction in

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general. Because perhaps it ought to be said of this last that *The Snow Queen* is the quintessence of a certain kind of science fiction, a journey as far into the heartlands of the genre as it is possible to go without starting to come back. The publishers call this "worldcraft," and it is a form of novel that more and more sf writers are essaying these days: "worldcraft" is the depiction of an entire planet or world, described politically, culturally, geographically, sociologically, scientifically and sometimes cartographically. (Joan Vinge earned a few bonus points for *not* including one of those unnecessary and faddish maps.) We glimpse this world through visits to highlife and lowlife, in long journeys across the world's surface or away from it into space, through witnessing the power struggles and conniving of the characters, by fearing for innocents at risk, by seeing the final triumph of a certain kind of moral rectitude, by thrilling to hints and clues to darker powers and supernormal talents, and in ogling the spectacular scenery that unfolds before the reader's eye in cascades of descriptive prose. Whatever, you can be assured that there is a lot of this sort of thing in *The Snow Queen:* 536 pages in all, competently handled.

Yes, the book is competent but not inspired. By the sort of criteria set out above, *The Snow Queen* is marked by "blindness": it is vague and wonderfull, tied by blood to its literary siblings, and likely to please the revelers.

It is in short reasonably well told, because it is planned and narrated with unassuming craft, but it is also moderately badly written. It is by no means a poor book, but it is an ordinary one, an overlong one.

At fault is Vinge's vocabulary, the choices she made in three crucial areas. In words, in people and in idiom. Vocabulary is all about choice: writers select from what is available, and we judge them by their particular taste or usage.

Consider her use of the English language. In spite of the fact that *The Snow Queen* occasionally reads like an Anne McCaffrey novel with long words, Vinge seems to prefer the plainest, least evocative words. There is no merit in linguistic exotica for its own sake, but after a few hundred pages the reader starts hungering for apparitions that are not "strange," for hatred that is not "ill-concealed," for dreamers who are not "headstrong," and so on. I searched in vain for the odd or appealing word (not counting sf nonce-words), for the newly turned phrase, the surprising simile. Caution is the hallmark of Vinge's prose, to the detriment of her images.

Then there is the vocabulary of her characters' responses. Again, Vinge is scrupulously tasteful in her approach to character, but in her anxiety not to go wrong, she underplays her hand. In a novel as long as this there is plenty of time for character development, and part of the pleasure of a lengthy read is

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in watching the people grow ... but (1) the book is too long anyway, (2) the sloth of the characters' development is part of the reason the book is so long, and (3) the plot actually moves much faster than our recognition of the characters. It is often difficult to remember who is who, particularly, her characters cannot exist without constantly looking at each other or touching each other. Fingers tremble, hands briefly touch, arms are gripped, eyes avert themselves; once noticed, this kind of thing can be extremely distracting. The vocabulary she selects from is limited. And when not body-languaging to each other the characters are given to flashing italicized thoughts at the reader, in the tedious tradition of the *Dune* books. This is a stylistic mannerism not often found outside science fiction; it is passed along from one generation of writer to the next, as if it were actually useful and not intrusive. Page 277: "And now? *Yes ... now!*" Who on earth thinks like that? I'm sure Vinge herself doesn't. It's stuff and nonsense, and merely adds more words to passages that are already overlong. On page 27 a character called Starbuck looks in a mirror and helpfully asks himself, "Who is Starbuck?", which is good timing as it leads the author into a long account of who Starbuck is. The author has picked up lazy habits from other science fiction writers, and she is much the worse for it.

But it is in the vocabulary of her chosen idiom that Vinge is, surprisingly, weakest. No one can write this sort of novel without running into a major creative difficulty. In a described world of a remote future, or of a remote part of the universe, the author will be imaginatively isolated from the very forces which made him or her into a writer: language, nation, culture, art, myth, slang, scenery, history, folklore, etc. This is a problem that can sometimes be solved by simply ignoring it (eg. in the *Star Wars* movies), but Vinge is an intelligent and conscientious writer and has I think appreciated the difficulty. The people of another world, when described as a coherent part of that world, would possess such an intangible underlay of assumptions, recognitions and cultural shorthand that any attempt at capturing it must be doomed. (And never mind the insuperable problem of having to write the book in English.) The twin traps for the author are banality and incomprehensibility, and the most demanding imaginative task inherent in writing this kind of novel is finding a safe line between them. In some ways the very size, and importance, of this problem might make the "worldcraft" type of novel congenitally unwritable, at least by serious novelists; Yet, Le Guin has almost pulled it off a couple of times, which underlines the degree of the challenge. Vinge has made an honorable attempt, but she is too often banal in her choice of metaphors, too often given to placing long introspective plot catch-ups in her character's minds.

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I recognized in the *The Snow Queen* a sincere attempt to write a good story, and I was only sorry I could not enjoy it more.

Joan Vinge turns up again, together with the ubiquitous Roger Zelazny, with an endorsement for *City of Baraboo*. One's estimation of Ms Vinge clicks up another notch or two: she is clearly motivated by human kindness.

City of Baraboo by Barry B. Longyear (try saying the title and name a few times, and reflect on authors' needs to try these things out before committing them to print) is an unconscionably awful novel. In a masterstroke of literary strategy, thwarting my theory of science fiction, it is neither well written nor well told. At a rough estimation of what went on, I'd say it was extremely well *scribbled*.

Unfortunately for Longyear, the sort of unfairness one hesitates to bring against Joan Vinge is well suited to him. He keeps a high profile. Longyear is a success: in the last two years he has risen from nowhere to a sort of sudden pre-eminence in the sf world. He has already won his first Hugo and Nebula awards, he is given to running workshops for would-be writers, and he has produced a number of articles for a writers' magazine, dealing with successful authorship. At the 1980 Worldcon he was given the John W. Campbell Award for the best new writer of the year. Is the science fiction world (as we say in England) going stark raving bonkers?

On the evidence of *City of Baraboo*, Longyear is a hasty, superficial and careless writer, lacking in even basic merit. You can't get much more basic than the idea of a book, and the one in this novel has a peculiarly contrived feeling to it. A circus of the 22nd Century has its assets foreclosed, and for some reason the circus management sees salvation in space-travel. The troupe sets off on a tour of the stars, putting up its tent to entertain the local aliens with jugglers, performing tigers and tightrope walkers. The feeling is irresistible that Longyear had already accumulated a research file on the history of the circus, needed material for a novel and contrived the background to fit the bill.

Whatever the reasons, what treatment does Longyear give to the concept? On a sort of lowbrow level you can't help acknowledging that an ingenious writer might come up with something of a plot. What would free fall do for the artistes' daily practice sessions?, how did the performing seals get on in hyperspace?, how did they go about recycling the elephant dung?, etc etc. I'm not sure this would actually hold the reader's interest for long, unless it was played for laughs, but you have to admit to a distant flickering of curiosity. However, *City of Baraboo* is not the place to find such a plot; in the great tradition of the *Star Wars* movies, Longyear solves the problems by ignoring them.

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Where Longyear's real plot interest lies is in something you might call plot-by-confrontation. The story, such as it is, deals with a series of contrived setbacks to the circus's fortunes, each of which is resolved glibly and quickly either by a kind of Heinleinian straight-talk, or by wheeler-dealing, or by fancy legal footwork. Yet it's sub-Heinlein, fifteen levels below, rather akin to those "problem" stories in *Astounding* in the 1950s, where the author has patently thought up the solution before setting out the plot. The first two chapters of *Baraboo* are a model for the rest: the circus is bankrupt, the animals are about to be confiscated, nothing is allowed to move, and the city officials are unbribable. However, in Chapter 2 (less than two pages long, which gives you a hint of the glibness involved), the circus management fixes up a deal and all is solved. Just like that. The reader moves on, discontented. Next time we meet the circus it has been set up on a planet where the "problem" is that the audience of local aliens will not applaud, then the circus runs into "problems" when it tries to buy a new spaceship, then they run into the "problem" of child abduction when a kid runs away to join them. And so on. By the time I reached the end my eyes were watering and my backside was itching.

D.G. Compton has earned a considerable amount of informed critical acclaim, and his readership is loyal. To some people he is one of the finest living stylists in science fiction. Yet he is regularly passed over for awards and his name is rarely touted in popularity polls. Why? Paranoiacly, one can't help feeling that part of the reason might be that he is British. He is, in fact, almost *the* British writer, in that he is the one who does all those things that British sf writers are supposed to do. He draws character (and especially female character) with subtlety and insight, he writes witty and understated prose, his plots seem to develop slowly and his endings often work out ambiguously.

The present reviewer, being prone to the same kind of vices, is naturally sympathetic to an author like Compton. Which makes it all the more unsettling that I was discontented with *Ascendancies*. This was partly from judging it by the high standards of his existing work, and partly from the sort of expectations, like them or not, that we often bring to science fiction.

Ascendancies raises a mystery; rather, it raises three connected mysteries. One is "Moondrift," radioactive cobwebs that fall from space, and which can be collected and put to energetic use. Another is the "Singing," a distracting and maddening sound that is often associated with ... the "Disappearances," in which, as might be inferred, the victims pop away from human ken. All this takes place in the late 1980s, the first encounter with Moondrift being said to have been in 1983.

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Thus we are in the sort of literary territory where under H.G. Wells's single-change theory (Moondrift and Disappearances being two aspects of one event), the near future is ripe for satire. However, with a few exceptions — eg. the Rolls-Peugeot on the second page — this is not Compton's intention this time. He is concerned instead with an insurance fraud, and a black market in corpses, told mainly through the story of the woman who commits a fraud and the insurance agent who catches her out. They, being of the educated British middle class, soon get in league with each other, fall in love, and then proceed to discuss their relationship into the ground.

It becomes, then, a comedy of manners (a form still beloved of British writers, and one which crops up surprisingly often in British sf; John Wyndham is the brand leader, but Richard Cowper is the leading contemporary exponent), and the science fiction mysteries, which *are* described intriguingly and are *not* just in the background, stay more or less unexplained. Much as we admire the author who sometimes goes against the idiom, it is not good enough for a fringe character to come up with a looney theory about television transmissions, then get dragged away by the heavies for psychiatric correction; that way the mysteries stay mysteries. One's irritation with this is sharpened by one's impatience with the two main characters. They are so unrepentantly articulate, knowing, witty, observant, analytical, etc., that one starts seeing the Disappearances as the final solution to the British middle class, and a good thing too.

Still, the novel is an enjoyable read, full of human observation, and more frequently than perhaps I've conveyed here it's humorous and original.

Bruce Sterling's *The Artificial Kid* is a good read too, but it took me two or three chapters to discover this. Although it is both written and told convincingly well, it must be said the book starts unpromisingly, describing the eponymous Kid, a rejuvenated, narcissistic combat artist, famed for doing his own deplorable thing, accompanied everywhere by six television cameras. In these early pages there is an auctorial relish that is dismaying; you can sense that spectacular violence is soon to erupt and that the reader will be expected to condone it. Inevitably, the violence starts, but the pain turns out to be bearable, both for reader and protagonist, and soon afterwards the novel takes off into the rather more palatable area of adventure. What follows is inventive, and told with flair and wit. Although the characters are a bit talkative at times, the narrative is muscular and readable and moves to a constructed (but constructed in the Borgesian sense, oddly enough) ending. A former protégé, one senses that the author is committing an act of release with this novel. It is an oddity, but a change is as good as a cure.

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An Inspector at Luna Immigration runs up against some pretty far-out creatures and situations, but the case of the Archeiportyx ghost is worthy of special mention.

Whither Thou, Ghost

BY
BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

I was working the number-three inspection table when the Archeiportyx mourner, his priest, and the boxed ghost of his father came through.

At Luna Immigration we clear — and sometimes refuse — Earth access to all races of the Federation; the sheer multitudinousness, the teeming *range*, of intelligent and occasionally devious creatures in this universe has never ceased to dazzle me. But even by these standards, which tend to make an Immigration Inspector old and a bit cynical before he is thirty, the Archeiportyx are unusual.

They are a race with a lifespan of hundreds of Earth centuries, but they achieve that span only by transmogrification. A mature Archeiportyx is roughly of anthropoid dimensions, although with four armlike appendages instead of two, and fetchingly speckled in shades of lavender or green or yellow, depending on which of their three sexes they happen to be. Approximately every fifty years, however, they sicken, waste away, and finally cease to exist in their previous forms; their bodies become ectoplasmic and then vaporous. It is the preservation of these vapors, or ghost, which controls their relative immortality. If they are segregated and treated in the proper way, they congeal after an interval of some weeks into an Archeiportyx infant who comes squawling into the world without memory, to be re-educated.

Since loss of vapors can involve loss of life, the Archeiportyx have evolved (as well they might) both a standard bronze receptacle in which to keep their ghosts and a strict set of rituals presided over by family priests; it is held that the ghosts must, during their highly vulnerable metamorphic

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condition, be kept in a constant and rigidly protected state of grace so that evil influences cannot harm them. It is also advised that the ghosts be taken on a long journey by loving relatives during this period of transmogrification — ancient custom maintaining that wider vistas will result in an enlarged and widened reincarnation.

It all sounds complicated, I know — but that's only the gist of what *The Checklist of Creatures*, Luna Immigration's authoritative guide, advises us about the Archeiportyx. There are other aspects which none of us at the Checkpoint are sure we understand to this day.

The lines were moving slowly in the main customs shed that morning, and the Archeiportyx mourner had a bored, sleepy look on his green-speckled face when his turn came. Through the first hole in his chin he wore a glittering red neircon fragment, too small to be import-taxed as a precious gem; through the second hole in his chin dangled the elliptical pendant that identified him as a mourner. The priest was lavender-hued, dressed in long flowing robes. He stood with his cowled head inclined in a reverential posture as he chanted over the bronze box he held in his second and third appendages.

They looked all right and their papers were in order; my first impulse was to pass them through without the rest of the formalities. But some deeper instinct held me back. Keeping undesirables from getting to Earth is an important job; if it wasn't for Inspectors like me, all sorts of riff raff — drug merchants, plague carriers, swindlers, smugglers, assassins, slave traders, pornographers — would get through. So we develop instincts and we learn to trust them.

I nodded at the receptacle the priest carried and said to the mourner in Federation English, "You have a ghost relative in there?"

"Yes," he said, "the ghost of my father. He passed over four days ago and is now in a state of enchantment."

"Deep enchantment," the priest amended, and the Comforter held in his fourth appendage opened one furry eye and blinked at me.

The Comforters of the Archeiportyx priests are a small green-pelted subrace whose astonishingly vigorous mnemonic and recitative talents — they have been known to quote the entire Archeiportyx scripture for days on end without stopping — conceal the fact that they have little intelligence and do not understand the sense of what they're reciting. I looked at this one and nodded politely; it made a gurgling sound and continued to blink at me in return. I shifted my gaze to the priest's face, but he was again crooning over the box in his own language.

"Where are you bound for on Earth?" I asked the mourner.

"We have many destinations," he said.

"Which one first?"

"Egypt and your great pyramids.

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We take my father to experience all the wonders of your world; then, in four weeks, we take him back to Archeiportyx to await his reincarnation."

"I see. Well, I'm afraid you'll have to open the box."

The priest stopped chanting. "But that cannot be done," he said. "The ghost is in a state of deep enchantment, at one with the perfectitude of the inner world. If the receptacle is opened he will awaken and perhaps attempt to escape —"

"Just a narrow crack, then," I said. "Regulations require me to check on what's inside there."

The priest said, "This is a sacrilege," and then began to chant again in Archeiportyx. The Comforter kept gurgling and blinking as before.

"You'll have to open the box," I said to the mourner. "Otherwise I can't pass you through."

"Very well, then," the mourner said. He took the receptacle out of the priest's grasp, set it before me on the table. Then he flicked the catch on the front, releasing it, and turned the box so that the front of it was toward me.

Leaning over close to it, I lifted the lid gently with the tip of my index finger and prepared to shine my scanlight inside. The priest, his head half-bowed, was watching me with a sharp-eyed intensity. There was no expression at all on the mourner's green-speckled face.

The interior of the box seemed to shimmer slightly; I pulled my head and hand back in reflex. But just before the lid dropped shut again, a streak of yellowish vapor came out and shot up past my right ear.

"He's escaped!" the priest cried. "You've let the ghost escape!"

"Father!" the mourner wailed. "Come back, father!"

But the ghost had no intention of coming back; once released, as had been noted in *The Checklist of Creatures*, Archeiportyx ghosts invariably head for daylight and open spaces. It hovered near me for a couple of seconds, as if orienting itself; then, when I reached out for it, it flowed off through the clearing area beyond, toward the passenger hangars for the Earth shuttles.

"He's getting away, he'll be lost!" the priest shouted. He lifted the skirts of his robe with one appendage and sprinted around past the checkpoint in hot pursuit. The mourner stayed where he was and the receptacle stayed on the table. "Stop him! Stop that ghost!"

There was a good deal of confusion then. Human and alien passengers alike, already cleared through and waiting for the next shuttle, came running to see what was going on. A couple of them shrieked, and an Arcturean sauropod fainted when the ghost sailed past, trailing yellow wisps like a comet's tail. The guards, who had been waiting on stand-by alert ever since I had pushed the nodule under the table, also converged on the area.

People and creatures milled about,

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pointing and making noise and bumping into each other. The ghost soared and kited among them, on its way out of the shed. Caught up in the spirit of the moment, as it were, at least half of the crowd began to give chase.

But not the Archeiportyx priest. And not me.

In the turmoil he eased over to the now-deserted baggage room and slipped inside. I slipped right in after him a few seconds later. And caught him leaning over one of the pieces of luggage, the Comforter extended in his fourth appendage.

"Hold it right there, you," I said.

He turned jerkily and looked at me from under his cowl. "The ghost," he said, "I believed it came in here ...."

"Sure you did."

I drew my stun-gun and waved it at him, backing him off to one side. Then I went over and cautiously relieved him of the Comforter with my free hand. It gazed up at me with frightened little eyes and made another gurgling sound. So I turned it upside down and shook it half a dozen times, hard. That did the trick.

The Comforter opened its mouth and out tumbled just about what I'd expected: more than twenty rare and valuable neircon gems that had been hidden inside.

"Let's see if I've got this straight," the Supervisor said later in his office. "They *wanted* you to open the receptacle and release the ghost, right?"

"Right," I said. "They were counting on it. If I hadn't done it, I suppose one of them would have found a way to do it himself. They knew the ghost, once released, would make for the nearest daylight and open space — which meant it had to go across the clearing area and past the baggage room toward the passenger hangars. The plan was to create confusion and then use it as a cover for the priest to slip into the baggage room and transfer the gems from the Comforter's mouth into somebody's already-inspected bag. Then, after order was restored, he and the mourner — and the Comforter — would submit to a full search, be passed through, take the next shuttle to Earth, and collect the gems there."

"A clever scheme," the Supervisor said. "How did you guess they weren't a real mourner and his priest?"

If there is one quality the Supervisor likes in his Inspectors, it's modesty. I said in modest tones, "Well, for one thing, the mourner didn't put up much of a protest when I insisted on having the box opened, and the priest only put up a half-hearted protest. Yet the Archeiportyx are supposed to be very protective of their ghosts and take great pains to keep them in a constant state of grace. Then there was the fact that the mourner didn't bother to give chase; only the priest did. And the priest didn't take the receptacle with him, probably because he didn't want to make me believe there might be

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something hidden inside it and come after him. But what was he going to put the ghost in if and when he caught him? So the ghost couldn't have been the mourner's father — stolen on Archeiportyx, no doubt, just like the gems — and the priest couldn't have been a priest."

"But how did you know they were smugglers?"

"Because of the Comforter," I said. "According to what the *Checklist* tells us about those creatures, they love to recite; they've been known to quote Archeiportyx scripture for days on end. Only this Comforter didn't say a single word; all it did was gurgle."

"Gurgle?" the Supervisor said. "Oh, I get it. It couldn't recite, could only gurgle, because its mouth was full of gems."

I nodded modestly.

"One more thing before you go back to work," he said. "What happened to the ghost? Has anybody, ah, apprehended it?"

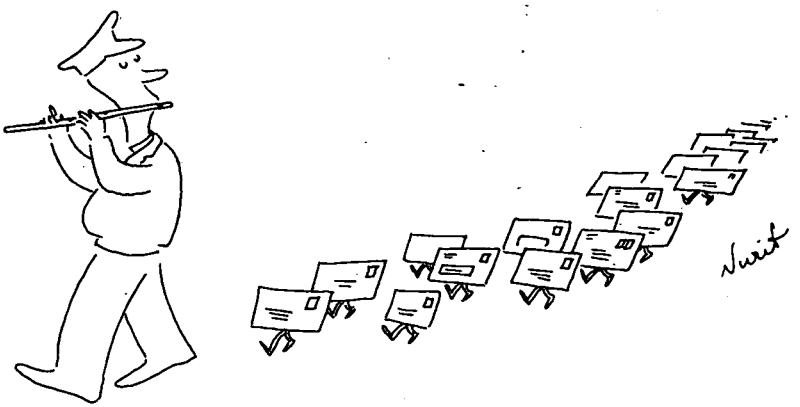
"No. We think it got out of the Dome through one of the hangar chutes. I doubt if we'll ever find it now."

The Supervisor grinned and looked up at the ceiling. "Whither thou, ghost?" he said.

But I was wrong, as it turned out: the ghost hadn't gotten out of the Dome after all, and we *did* find it — six weeks later, near the little-used number-four supply shed. Reincarnated as a squawling, bright yellow Archeiportyx infant of the third sex.

I took it into the Supervisor's office myself and plopped it down on his desk.

"Hither thou ghost," I said.



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"The Killing Thought" is Edward Shaver's first published story. The author writes that he graduated from Pennsylvania State University in 1977 with a B.S. in Physics and is currently employed by a support contractor to the Department of Energy's solar energy program.

The Killing Thought

BY

EDWARD F. SHAVER

Even without the fresh fall of snow, they left a track he could have followed on a moonless night. There were two of them, and they traveled slowly, as if there were no real reason for their passage and nothing to watch for over their shoulders. In that they were wrong, but he had tracked them for six days now, and as twilight fell on the seventh, he still waited.

They reached the bank of the fast-running stream just as the sun was leaving the clear winter sky, and soon a small fire glowed against the snow. From his vantage point on the ridge, he watched this last mistake and began to feel the closeness of the kill. When night had fallen, he moved out from his cover, sitting down with his back against a tall pine. Beneath the heavy cloak of furs, he was invisible from the silent valley with its single spot of warmth, but his gaze seldom strayed there now, remaining fixed on the sky instead. A quarter moon crested the far side of the valley, brightening the fallen snow with its pale light, and he sat motionless as it traversed the sky and finally disappeared in the trees over his head.

The fire below dwindled down to embers, and he began to fear he'd been wrong in his premonition. Dawn was only a few hours away, but the kill had always come in the deep of night, when the prey was at its most helpless. Perhaps it wouldn't be that night after all, and perhaps the two camped in the valley were luckier than he had ever been.

He was just about to abandon his vigil when he heard a rustling on the wind, and in an instant his heart was pounding in his ears. The sound came again, and this time it was close enough to be recognized as the rushing

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of air over smooth metal surfaces. The two forms asleep by the fire hadn't stirred and probably wouldn't until it was too late. Without their conscious fear to mask his presence, he would have to clear his own mind or risk finding the roles of hunter and hunted turned against him. His hand tightened on the weapon beneath the cloak as he closed his eyes, filling his thoughts with images of endless fields of snow.

The rustling became a gentle whine as it coasted down on the cold wind, clearing the trees and circling the valley floor once in search of the prey. Still he kept his eyes closed, though now he could feel its presence as a subtle pressure at the back of his mind. He thought of the snow and clenched the wooden bow in his hand, waiting and praying for the crunch of the snow that would signal it had landed.

It never came, or if it did, it was drowned in the startled scream that echoed from the camp below. He opened his eyes, struggling to keep his conscious mind filled with the snow as he watched the alien touch down lightly. The traces of moonlight as they hung motionless a few feet off the ground.

"No!" screamed one of the humans in a tone that jogged at something inside of him. They were hopelessly trapped now, and that single word carried all the desperation of two lives about to end.

The alien left the silver wings and crossed the snow in long, effortless strides, stopping at the top of the embankment that led down to the stream. It watched its prey for a moment, savoring the kill that was now within easy reach, but not quite ready to end the chase so quickly.

The thoughts of snow were forced from his mind by a sudden stab of pain, and he could only imagine its impact in the minds of the humans who bore its full force. As he watched, one stumbled into the shallow water of the stream, rolling sluggishly as the other tried to pull him back to his feet. The alien drew its tall, slender body to its full height, slowly extending the three, fleshless arms as it gathered for the killing thought.

Now was the time, and he rose slowly, his back pressing against the tree as the cloak fell away. He brought the taut bowstring back to his ear, grunting softly at the effort. There was a new hunter on the field, and he smiled through clenched teeth.

"I'm here," he said quietly. "I'm here you bastard."

He felt the alien touch his mind an instant before it turned away from the humans huddling in the middle of the stream, scanning the side of the ridge for the mind it heard.

"That's right," he said, holding the bowstring until the alien found him and his head filled with pain at the touch.

He released his grip, listening as the swish of the arrow was followed an instant later by the sharp impact on its

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target. The pain was gone as the alien stared down at the wooden shaft quivering in its narrow chest. It brought an arm up to cover the wound, but before it could react further, a second arrow cut the pressure suit farther down, sinking deeper than the first.

It stood for a long moment, and when the silent struggle was finished, the corpse tumbled down the embankment and lay still in the snow.

He drew a tired breath, wiping the perspiration from his forehead as he started down the ridge. The two humans were still crouched in the stream, and one was sobbing softly as he stepped cautiously through the icy water. He knelt beside the one who had fallen, pulling the cloak aside to reveal the face of a young woman whose blond hair fell loosely into the water. He picked her up, carrying her to the shore and laying her gently in the snow as the other watched in silence.

He unfastened the bulky cloak, sliding his hand between the warm breasts as he felt for a heartbeat. After several seconds he shook his head, withdrawing his hand.

"She was very beautiful," he said, staring down at the lifeless face. "If you'd been more careful, you might not have lost her."

He rose, brushing the snow off his leather leggings as he glanced over at his silent companion. "My name is Harrison," he said, peering into the shadows that obscured the other's face. He hesitated a moment, and then slowly crossed the few steps separating them.

She took a startled breath as Harrison pulled back the hood, staring defiantly up at him as her tangled hair moved in the breeze.

"Two women," Harrison said to himself. "Traveling alone. You must both have been insane."

He waited a moment for a response and then turned to scan the sky. He had already stayed too long, and although the aliens usually hunted alone, the chance wasn't worth taking. He walked down the bank of the stream until he came to the corpse of the alien, pushing it over onto its back with his foot. The visor of the tight pressure suit had broken in the fall, and the black leathery skin was vaguely visible beneath the splintered plastic.

"Twelve!" he whispered harshly, turning away from the corpse and striding up the embankment. He was already halfway across the clearing when she called over his shoulder.

"Harrison!"

He turned and watched her struggle up the slope, her breath coming in silver strands that rapidly dispersed on the wind. She followed his footsteps, stopping a short distance away as her gaze fell to the snow.

"You can use me...if I can go with you." She looked up, the defiance still strong in her voice.

Harrison returned the steady gaze of her pale blue eyes but said nothing until she reluctantly began to open the

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front of her cloak. He caught her hand, pulling the hood up around her head.

"We've got to make fifteen kilometers by daylight. We stay together as long as you keep up with me." He turned away without waiting for a reply, the snow crunching underfoot as they climbed the ridge and left the valley behind.

Harrison's long stride never seemed to vary, and soon her entire universe dwindled to the backs of his leggings as they plowed steadily through the snow. Every breath of cold air stung her dry throat, and she lost all track of time as she concentrated on the simple task of putting one foot after the other. The sun had yet to clear the trees when Harrison brought them to a halt before the entrance to a heavily wooded ravine that cut the side of a low ridge. He pulled a canteen from the leather pouch slung across his shoulder, taking a long drink before passing it to the woman.

"You can keep a good pace," he said as he watched her drain off the rest of the water. "We can spend the day here. There's a campsite up the ravine that's invisible from the air."

He slipped the empty canteen into the pouch and started through the thicket that blocked the entrance. In a few moments they emerged onto a narrow path that ended in a small clearing. Harrison slipped the gear off his shoulders and sat down heavily on the carpet of brown pine needles, motioning for her to do the same.

"You haven't told me your name," he said, pulling a slab of dried meat from the pouch and offering it to her.

"Beth," she answered, warily accepting the food.

"It's venison. But be careful. It's pretty salty." He made a cushion of the pouch, leaning back with a long sigh. "Now tell me how two women came to be traveling alone."

"We were running from Kagen," Beth said through a mouthful of the dried meat. "We decided that it was better to be killed by the things than to stay with him."

"Kagen," Harrison said thoughtfully. "I don't think I've ever heard that name before."

"He's an animal," Beth said, nodding emphatically. "He wanted Jarmane, so he killed the men we were traveling with and told us to travel with his group. He would have killed me too, but Jarmane wouldn't let him. We stayed with them awhile because we didn't know what else to do, but finally Jarmane couldn't take it any more. We ran off ten days ago, and we've been alone ever since." She took another bite, watching Harrison push himself up onto one elbow.

"What were you going to do for food? Can you hunt?"

Beth shrugged and shook her head. "We took a whole pack of food when we left Kagen's camp. I guess we were going to find another group before we starved."

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Harrison shook his head and rolled onto his back. "I think you would have starved. There aren't many people in this part of the country, and very few groups who would have been willing to take you on for the winter."

Her chewing slowed, and after a long pause she asked," What about your group?"

Harrison held her gaze for a moment and then glanced away. "I'm alone. That's the way I've always been."

"But isn't that more dangerous," she asked, licking the salt off her chapped lips. "I mean, how can you protect yourself against other groups...or the things?"

"One man traveling alone is a hell of a lot harder to track than twenty or thirty people traveling together," he answered slowly. "And one man has as much chance against an alien as a hundred. Most don't ever learn that until it's too late." He paused a moment, looking over at the woman. "How old are you, Beth?"

She gazed up at the trees as she did a calculation in her head. "Twenty-three or twenty-four, I think," she said at last.

Harrison nodded as he continued, "Then you would have been six or seven when the aliens came. You don't remember the way things were before, do you?"

Beth rested the venison in her lap as she sifted back through the handful of memories carefully stored away. "Not very much," she said quietly. "I remember a big Christmas tree with lights and shining things. I remember my parents a little...their faces, and the way their voices sounded. Then all of the confusion...." She looked up at him, coming out of her thoughts.

"How old are you, Harrison?"

"Forty-one," he answered, noting the flash of surprise in her eyes.

"I've never known anyone so old," she stammered, for the first time noticing that the hair falling over his temples was mostly grey.

"That's because men my age are either dead or smart enough to stay unseen by anyone, especially the dogs you've been traveling with." Harrison turned over on his side, trying to get comfortable on the cold ground. "I think they're mostly dead, though. There aren't many smart people left, only tough young ones like your Kagen, who'll be dead as soon as their luck runs out."

Beth brought the venison to her lips once more, but her throat was already coated with salt, and she decided against another bite. She got up on her knees, offering the meat to Harrison.

"Had enough?" he asked as he sliced off a slab for himself.

"Yes," she answered, settling back on her haunches. "Have you killed one before?"

He looked at her over a hunk of meat, trying to decipher the question. "You mean an alien?"

She nodded slowly.

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"Eleven times," he said. "Last night was the twelveth."

She sat in silent amazement while a breeze invaded the ravine, stirring the branches overhead. "But how?" she asked when it was quiet again. "How can an old man do what so many young men can't?"

Harrison finished chewing, and then he carefully slid the meat back into the pouch before he said, "Because young men hunt with their strength instead of their brains. They don't stop to ask themselves how the aliens hunt, and so they never understand how they're being killed until that last instant before they die." He looked at Beth for a moment, making a silent wager with himself. "Do you know how the alien killed Jarmane last night?"

Beth frowned, staring down at the pine needles sticking to her bare knees. "My head hurt...and then Jarmane screamed and fell." She looked up, meeting Harrison's gaze. "The...the alien must have made Jarmane's head hurt too, only worse."

Harrison smiled at the outcome of his bet as he said, "The aliens track with their minds, and when they have their prey at a disadvantage, they kill with their minds. All the strength in the world is useless when an alien sends the killing thought."

"But you killed it," she said suddenly. "And it knew you were there."

Harrison shook his head. "It knew, but only when it was too late to stop the arrow. Even the aliens get lazy, I guess, especially after hunting prey as easy as you and Jarmane. I masked my mind so that all it saw were yours."

"You can really do that?" Beth asked, her eyes widening. "Then why do you hide? You can kill them whenever you want."

"It's not that simple," Harrison said as he sat up, pulling the empty canteen from the pouch. "I can't mask my mind completely, and I don't really know how powerful the aliens are. I only know that if there are other minds nearby, especially minds filled with fear, then I can mask mine long enough to get off a shot. If I ever miss with that first arrow, I'll be as dead as Jarmane."

Harrison pushed himself to his feet, stretching his tired back. "I'm going to get some water. Don't leave the ravine while I'm gone."

He'd started back the way they'd entered when Beth spoke quickly.

"Harrison...you are coming back, aren't you?"

He turned, watching her for a long moment in the filtered light of the ravine. She wasn't really pretty, certainly not as beautiful as the body they'd left beside the stream. But there was a spark in her pale blue eyes that spoke of more than a hungry animal wrapped in a frayed cloak of furs.

"Tomorrow we'll start for the high mountains," he said. "I have a permanent camp there that's safe. I've done enough hunting for this winter."

She nodded and watched him dis-

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appear into the underbrush, trying to remember another time in her life when she had looked forward to the day to follow.

At dusk of the next day, Harrison nudged Beth from a sound sleep, and with little more than a nod of his head, introduced her to the daily ritual of his existence.

They traveled slowly in the darkness, and Harrison never let their path stray across open ground unless there was no alternative. Those first nights of travel proved to be a nightmare of frustration for Beth, since she had never before attempted to navigate woodland underbrush without the benefit of daylight. She slept in exhaustion during the days and gradually began to mimic Harrison's style, so that by the end of the first week, she moved almost as easily as he did.

She also discovered that a moonlit night was the easiest time to hunt the small game that formed the staples of their diet. From time to time, Harrison would freeze in midstride, holding up an open hand as a signal for her to do the same. Then he would point at something in the dim light, and after several moments, Beth would see what he had seen. Rabbits, or possum, or occasionally a deer. If they needed the food, Harrison would let an arrow fly. If they didn't, he would let her watch for a few seconds, then move on, marking an end to the silent lesson.

Early on the morning of their eighth day of travel, Harrison crested a ridge a few steps ahead of Beth and suddenly crouched, signaling her to silence. She crept up beside him, following his gaze down into the narrow clearing that lay before them. Three small fires cut the predawn gloom, and she could vaguely discern a handful of huddled shapes crowding each flickering glow. As she watched, one stood and faced their direction, the firelight sharpening the heavy features on the bearded face.

"Kagen!" she gasped, feeling the breath catch in her throat.

Harrison clasped his hand over her mouth, and then returned his gaze to the man standing by the fire.

"So that's Kagen," he said softly as he released her. "Unless you value his company, I suggest you be quiet."

"Kill him, Harrison!" she whispered urgently, leaning close to his ear. "Kill him! It would be easy for you. Easier than when you killed the alien."

Harrison looked down at her, catching the glow of revenge that shone in her eyes. He shook his head slowly, turning back toward Kagen as he said," I've never killed a human being, and I have no reason to change that now."

Beth drew back in surprise, glancing once more at Kagen before she said, "It's only one arrow...one arrow and he'll be dead. Is one arrow so important to you?"

Harrison sat back in the snow be-

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side her, draping his arms across his knees. The hate was strong in her voice, and its strength conjured up images of what Kagen had done to generate such emotion. Harrison watched him, fighting hard to keep Beth's hate from guiding his own hand.

"It's not the arrow, Beth," he said at last. "It's the life. You can't destroy so easily, with nothing as a reason but hatred. There are laws...." He stopped short, watching the puzzlement on her face. "There were laws...and ideals, and civilization." He looked from Beth to Kagen, who stood warming his hands over the fire. "You've lost it though, haven't you?"

She watched Harrison murmuring to himself, her thoughts of revenge fading in the confusion over his words. It seemed like such an easy thing to put an arrow into Kagen's chest, yet he wouldn't do it.

Harrison sat a moment longer, and then he rose, crouching low as he retraced their steps over a ridge. Beth followed in silence, wishing that she were older so that the memories of the world that had died on that day in her childhood wouldn't be so fleeting. Then she might know the things that had kept Harrison's arrow in its sling, and understand how something called a law could save the life of an animal like Kagen.

The body was partially covered with a layer of blown snow, and as Chrysolan brushed it clean, the revulsion welling up from the other intruded at the edge of its mind. When the two broken shafts were fully exposed, Chrysolan stood and quickly scanned the surrounding slopes for some trace of the killers. After several seconds, the alien relaxed again, for the sensations were barely noticeable. That meant that at least a cycle had passed since they had killed the Khyma at its feet.

The disgust intruded again, and the alien turned toward the other Khyma who still stared down at the corpse.

"Is it so revolting?" Chrysolan thought, pushing into the other's awareness. "It is death, no different than if the mind had been burned clean."

"At least there is honor in that," Mylotha insisted quickly. "What honor is there to die this way?"

"This Khyma hunted like a fool, and grew accustomed to prey such as that." Chrysolan motioned vaguely with an arm toward the body of Jarmane which lay a short distance away. "A Khyma deserves no honor in death if it can be bested by minds such as those."

Mylotha's thoughts became a hazy blur of anger, but no words formed in Chrysolan's mind as it watched the other Khyma stalk up the slope and climb into a set of flying wings. As they lifted on the breeze that swept the valley, the perfunctory salute flashed briefly at the edge of Chrysolan's grasp.

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"Farewell and good hunting, Chrysolan. May you never be touched."

Chrysolan returned the farewell as Mylotha disappeared beyond the trees, and then the alien searched the clearing until it found the two sets of footprints that left the valley together. It knelt in the snow, opening its mind until consciousness became a confusion of the emanations from all the simple life around. Chrysolan sifted through the traces with careful patience until it was certain there were only three of note, and one of those must have belonged to the one by the stream. That left two, and as it rose, Chrysolan felt the call of an unknown prey. There was something different here, and dangerous, and perhaps it wasn't entirely new.

Other Khyma had disappeared in that region, and Chrysolan was suddenly certain that if the bodies were ever located, a few at least would bear the wounds of those crude wooden shafts. Had they all been careless fools, or was there something worth the hunt on that miserable planet after all?

Chrysolan felt for the traces once again so that they would be remembered, and then it returned to its own silver wings hanging gently on the wind. In a moment it was lost in the low clouds that blanketed the valley, leaving the two corpses by the stream to the mercy of the wolves.

Beth lost track of the days but soon began to recognize a change in the land they crossed. The occasional ridges became a constant string of hills, and she realized that with few exceptions, their path always carried them upward. The forest became thicker, with no clues that men had left a mark even before the coming of the aliens, and she often wondered how Harrison could find his chosen way.

Early one night when they had stopped to rest beneath an outcropping of rock on a wooded hillside, she saw Harrison pull a small metal object from somewhere beneath his cloak. He held it carefully in his cupped hand, and after several moments of scrutiny, slid it back beneath the folds and looked up to meet her questioning gaze.

"A compass," he said, readily seeing that the word meant nothing to her. "Haven't you ever seen a compass?"

Harrison pulled the compass back into the moonlight and motioned for her to come closer.

"It tells you the direction, so that you can find your way across country like this without needing any landmarks. This needle always points toward the north," he said, holding it out so that Beth could see but keeping the instrument firmly grasped in his hand. "Right now, we want to travel due west, so we line up the needle and then head toward this mark on the compass. Understand?"

Beth nodded slowly and then looked up from the compass.

"But how does it know which way

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s north?" she asked.

Harrison took a deep breath and ettled against the rock face behind iim. "I don't suppose you've ever ieard of something called a magnetic ield, have you?"

She merely returned a blank stare, nd Harrison closed his hand over the ompass, returning it to the safety of is cloak.

"I guess you'll have to call it magic or the time being."

Beth frowned as something tugged t her memory. "What's magic?" she sked after a moment's hesitation.

"Magic..." Harrison began slowly, mused by the seriousness in her eyes. Magic is what ran the world before eople invented science."

"And you were alive then?" she sked without shifting her gaze for a ioment.

Harrison laughed and came to his et. "We have a long way to go, and iere will be better times to talk. I'll explain about the magic then." He laughd again, shouldering the pack of supplies as he turned and continued up the ope.

The moon had waxed full and wand to a crescent when they came to the ver on a night that was breathlessly ill. Beth stood next to Harrison at the op of a steep embankment that led to ie water's edge, listening to the gentle oar of the current. He was staring at omething in the darkness farther up ie river, and it took her several moments to make out the distant outline of a bridge.

"Is that where we cross?" she asked.

Harrison shook his head, keeping his gaze fixed on the bridge as he said, "I don't know if it's safe. There might be a larger group of humans camped on the other side, or an alien might be using the bridge to start a track."

"Maybe we could swim across," Beth ventured, though she quickly changed her mind as she watched the racing water.

"That would probably be the best way if it were summer," Harrison said. "But we'd both freeze pretty damn fast in this weather."

"Isn't there any place nearby where it isn't so deep?" Beth asked quickly, the relief obvious in her voice. "Then we could just walk across."

Harrison shook his head as he answered. "The river runs high for another fifty kilometers down stream. In the other direction is rougher terrain that I wouldn't like to cross on my own at this time of year, and with you along...." He coasted into silence, turning back toward the bridge. "We'll camp here for a few days and watch. Maybe it's deserted and all we have to do is walk across."

And so they watched, or rather Harrison watched while Beth spent most of her time sleeping in the hidden camp he prepared. Harrison would disappear for hours on end after leaving her with firm instructions not to leave

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the campsite, returning just long enough to eat some of the salted venison before heading out again. Late on the second night of the vigil, he returned and sat down with more than a trace of finality.

"We cross tonight," he said quietly, staring at Beth in the darkness.

"It's safe?" she asked, offering him the canteen.

"There isn't anyone on this side of the river, though there are several old camps. The newest looks as if its been empty for more than a month." He took a long swallow of water, slowly fastening the cap as he continued. "As for the other side...if anyone's over there, they're being awfully careful. No fires, no noise, no tracks on the other bank, at least as far as I can see from this side. They've probably moved out of the mountains for the winter. following the game."

Beth nodded, but the nervousness in her stomach easily surmounted Harrison's assurances. He fell into a light sleep, and she watched him patiently, assuming that he hadn't slept at all for the past two days. He stirred an hour later and took a deep breath of the night air, rising slowly as he freed his heavy bow from its leather covering.

"Let's go," he said quietly as he tested the bowstring. "You carry the food pouch and the canteen. Follow behind me and don't make a sound, whatever happens."

He started into the underbrush, doubling back through the woods along a path he'd blazed during his watch. A half-hour later, they emerged into the open beside the crumbling surface of an old highway, a hundred paces from the dark framework of the bridge.

Harrison led them down the edge of the forest, only climbing onto the pavement when they'd reached the river's edge. He stopped to listen for some sound from the other side, and Beth noticed that he'd fitted a long arrow loosely onto the bow.

"What is it?" she whispered before he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

After another moment he started across the bridge, the soft soles of his leggings moving silently over the asphalt. The water roared beneath them, although Beth heard little beyond the pounding of her own heart by the time they stepped off the pavement on the other side of the river.

Harrison led them back into the protection of the trees, and a few moments later they came to the edge of a small clearing. He stopped abruptly, and Beth stumbled against him from behind.

"What is it?" she whispered, trying to peer around his shoulder.

Harrison took several steps forward, kneeling beside four dark patches huddled together in the center of the clearing.

"An alien was here," he answered.

Beth squinted into the shadows and found herself staring into the startled

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eyes of a woman. The mouth was still open in the silent scream that had been the last act of life, and she lay between three other bodies whose faces were buried in the snow.

"Why?" Beth groaned, her breath coming fast. "Why do they do it?"

He glanced over at the dead ashes of a fire, prodding the frozen remains of a small animal they had been cooking. "I think they do it for sport, that's all. The way men used to hunt when we still owned this planet." He rose, brushing the snow off his hands.

"They're frozen," he said, "and they've been dead at least a month. But the sooner we put about twenty kilometers behind us, the better I'll feel. Tonight we travel until we drop." He glanced at her and then started into the forest on the other side of the clearing, never looking back again until the morning sun had climbed above the western horizon.

At last there came a night when Harrison chose his path without the aid of the compass and moved with a certainty that said he had traveled that place many times before. They pushed on even after sunrise, and Beth knew they must be close to journey's end.

The sun had climbed high in a brilliant sky when Harrison brought them over the top of a ridge that opened onto a narrow mountain valley, and he stood smiling down at the dense growth of pine trees as if he were meeting an old friend.

"That's it, Beth," he said between breaths. "We made it."

She followed his gaze into the valley, looking for something to greet them beyond the thicket of trees that gave way to the steep, rocky slope of the mountainside rising up a hundred meters away. There was nothing warm or safe in what she saw. Only the lonely snow-capped peak which towered in the distance.

"Why here?" she asked finally. "It's so cold...."

Harrison smiled briefly but didn't answer as he started down the slope into the valley. Beth followed a few steps behind, trying to discover something amusing in what she'd said. In a few minutes they came upon a narrow path that hugged the far wall of the valley, and Harrison hurried along, talking over his shoulder.

"My grandfather blazed this path more than seventy years ago," he said. "He loved this place so much that he wanted to die here."

Harrison stopped abruptly, motioning toward the rocky slope a few meters away.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

Beth followed his gesture, but it took several seconds for her to see the large wooden door that seemed to be resting among a scattering of boulders. Harrison stepped up to the door, pushing aside some tree limbs he had used for camouflage. He pulled hard on the latch, and it took several tries before

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the door swung open on the dark interior. He disappeared quickly across the threshold, and it was several moments before his head reappeared in the doorway.

"Come in," he said. "Or did you walk all this way to stand outside?"

Beth crossed the threshold and found herself in the middle of a large, low-ceilinged room that must have been cut out of the mountain itself. The walls were of mortared stone, while the floor was covered with worn wooden planks. As she watched, Harrison pulled slowly on a rope hanging from the center of the beamed ceiling, and daylight was soon pouring through an opening left by a sliding panel over her head.

Harrison rubbed his hands together for warmth as he followed her gaze to the ceiling. "My grandfather's idea," he said. "This whole cabin was his idea. He and my father built it with their own hands more than fifty years ago, and you won't find a loose stone anywhere." He crossed the room to a large fireplace that filled most of the rear wall, pulling several logs from a pile at his feet.

"This is the best," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "And it's probably saved my life more times than I'll ever know. The smoke draws up a natural cleft in the rock. I don't know where it comes out, or if it comes out at all, but it means that you can burn a fire all day long and there won't be a trace of smoke in the sky."

Harrison pulled off his cloak and sat down on one of the narrow beds that stood against each side wall, motioning toward the other across the room. "That's where you sleep. I don't know how the mattress has stood the test of time, but I'm sure it's better than hard ground."

Beth nodded slowly, looking at the bed for a moment before her attention was caught by something across the room. At the foot of Harrison's bed stood a rough-hewn set of shelves and a small table, all of which were stacked high with books. She walked to the table and gingerly opened the top book in a stack, gazing with fascination at the pages filled with orderly scribbles she knew to be words.

"I've got quite a few there," Harrison said. "During the first years after the aliens came, I could find them everywhere during my hunts. But now it's not so easy unless you go into the larger towns or cities." He pushed himself off the bed and came to her side, reaching up to one of the shelves.

"These are my favorites," he said, pulling several volumes from among the rest. "Have you ever read anything by Hemingway?"

Beth looked down at the books he offered her and slowly shook her head. "I can't read, Harrison," she said, realizing with wonderment that he could.

"You can't..." he began, looking up at the collection of books. "No...I guess you never would have had the

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chance." He stood in silence for a minute, trying to recall that distant time when he had first learned to read.

"You know," he said at last, "I might be able to teach you, at least a little. I've never tried teaching anyone before...."

"I'd like to try," Beth said quickly, watching as Harrison returned the books to their places on the shelf.

"So would I," he said with a nod. "But right now we've got some work getting this place ready to live in. We need firewood, and water, and maybe something to eat besides dried venison. I'll show you where the stream is so you can fill those two water bags hanging on the wall over there, and then I'll do some hunting.

"Tonight we're going to eat a hot meal in a dry cabin, and then I'm going to sleep for a week." He held her gaze for a moment, and for the first time since they'd met, his smile didn't fade as quickly as it came.

Beth collected the water pouches and followed Harrison back into the daylight, remembering the strangeness of that smile. In all her life, she had never seen anyone smile the way he had, for no reason but feelings inside. She had never even thought it a possibility, but she must have been wrong about that and a thousand other things besides. She tramped through the pine trees and wondered if Harrison knew all the answers there were to be had in a world that made no sense at all.

* * *

The alien let the wings bank on the wind, stiffening slightly as the ground rose up to meet the descent. The trace became stronger than it had been for many cycles, and Chrysolan turned to sweep past the bridge a second time. There was soon no doubt that this was the place they had crossed, and the only question was whether or not the alien would be able to follow the trace on the other side of the river.

Chrysolan came down on the bank a few paces from the bridge, scanning the snow as it stepped away from the wings. The alien wasn't surprised to see nothing left to mark the passage of the prey, since the wind of even a single cycle would have filled any tracks with snow. But there was something that disturbed it, and when the Khyma opened its mind a little more, the misgivings were assured.

A killing thought of great power had ben delivered nearby, and although it had been many cycles, the remaining strength was enough to obscure the trace Chrysolan wished to follow. The alien stood for a moment in the sunlight and then plunged into the forest, letting the traces lead the way. It entered the clearing a few seconds later, closing its mind as the remnants of the killing thought became too powerful.

Chrysolan stared down at the frozen corpses, realizing that the necessary traces were all but obliterated. By choice or chance, the two it followed had passed almost by that very

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place, perhaps within easy reach of its longest arm. Yet luck had granted them free passage, at least for the moment.

The alien returned to the wings and rose quickly on the wind, spending a long while passing in wide circles over the bridge and gazing at the mountains that roughened the western horizon. They were safe for the remainder of the cold season, that Chrysolan was forced to accept. But they had passed that way once, and it wasn't illogical to assume that they might do so again. It would wait—and be ready when they did. Then Chrysolan might discover what could kill a Khyma with nothing more than shafts of wood—and, perhaps, hate.

Harrison had always hated winters, yet now the months seemed to fly faster than he would have wished. He had forgotten the simple pleasure of talking with another human being or having the chance to react to something other than his own memories. At first it was difficult, and several weeks passed before he lost the defensiveness that arose whenever Beth accidentally crossed some inner barrier, but gradually the walls crumbled.

Harrison began to teach her the skills that had kept him alive, finally deciding that she should know everything he had learned during his years of isolation. Long before he realized, the enjoyment he felt when he knew that some piece of knowledge had made the crossing from his mind to hers became an obsession.

Beth learned to track, acquiring an eye for the small signs left by the passing of man or animal. She practiced with Harrison's heavy bow until she could put nine out of ten arrows into a stationary target fifty paces away, and she learned to move quietly so that she would never have to shoot from any farther. He made her memorize the sight and feel of the edible wild plants, and they spent long afternoons on foraging expeditions until Beth was certain that she could find them with her eyes closed.

But the knowledge of survival was only the first hurdle, and Harrison was reminded of it every time he caught her staring at the books. The printed word remained to be conquered, and it promised to be a difficult battle, for he had long since forgotten his own first experiences with reading. In the end, he applied simple logic to the problem and started with the alphabet.

The walls of the cabin gradually disappeared behind sheets of paper, each bearing the careful drawing of a letter and an object whose name began with that same letter. Even that was no easy task, since many of Harrison's initial examples were as meaningless to Beth as the letters they illustrated, and he spent several days pondering words to accompany some of the infrequently used consonants.

Once Beth had committed the al-

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phabet to memory, she took the great leap into her first book. With considerable ceremony, Harrison took H.G. Wells' *Outline of History* off the shelf, listening with pride as she conquered the title after a mere ten minutes of effort. Beth learned the basics of phonetics by trial and error as she read aloud for him, listening patiently as he explained her seemingly endless mistakes. He taught with the same patience, smiling at every word that made the unsteady transition into reality, and somewhere along the line, Beth made the passage from groping to reading.

Once she could pronounce them with reasonable ease, Beth began the task of learning the meanings that lay behind the words that filled the books, and as she did, she discovered the world as it had been. There were cities and nations; great men and terrible battles, all of which suddenly became real, and she felt as if she were slowly approaching some huge painting, glimpsing new and wonderful details with each step that she took. The multitudes of names and places and dates were soon forgotten, but something touched her more than anything else she found in the books.

Beneath all the madness and motion, there was a sense of purpose. The people she read about had been doing something or going someplace that mattered, at least to them. They planned and worked, fought and died, and dreamed of what they might make of the days to follow. And if most of the dreams were foolish, they were more than she had ever had.

"What's this word?" Beth asked one night from her place before the fire.

"Say it," Harrison answered, repeating what had become a ritual between them.

She frowned at the page for a moment and then stammered, "Des...tin...eye."

Harrison rolled off his bed and peered over her shoulder.

"Destiny," he corrected after a moment's pause.

"But what is it?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Well...." Harrison cleared his throat as he gazed into the fire. "You couldn't have picked some easier words tonight, could you."

"You don't know what it means?"

"Of course I know," he returned uneasily. "It's a vague idea, that's all." He took a deep breath and faced her again. "It means the ultimate purpose of someone or something."

Beth nodded and frowned, waiting a few seconds before she asked, "And what does ultimate mean?"

"Well...it means final, at the end of everything." He watched the puzzlement on her face for a moment and then said, "Let me give you an example. I can say with reasonable certainty that death is a part of the destiny of every living thing."

The frown left her face, and after an interval she nodded her head slowly.

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"But it's more than dying, isn't it?" she asked.

"Of course," Harrison answered as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "It means the final total of whatever you do or think or say during your life, and what it's all worth at the end."

"What's your destiny, Harrison?" she asked, surprising him with her quickness.

He returned her gaze and felt several answers slip away unspoken. "I don't really know," he said at last, looking beyond her shoulder into the fire. "It's been a long time since I thought about it."

Beth caught the confusion in his eyes and decided to ask nothing more that night. She climbed into her own bed and watched his face in the firelight.

"Good night, Harrison," she said quietly, turning toward the wall.

He only nodded in reply, and when he was sure she was asleep, he sat down before the fire and turned *The Outline of History* to it's opening pages. He began to read what he hadn't read in so many years, and while his question was nothing more than a feeling, he decided he would never let himself be free of it again.

Harrison walked slowly down the narrow path, trying to get the words set in his own mind before he faced her. It was the warmest day thus far in the young spring, and he hadn't been surprised to find the cabin empty when he returned from his morning hunt. Beth had talked of this day for weeks, and he had few doubts that she was already taking advantage of the sunshine and using the small pool that collected at the lower end of the valley.

The path emerged from the shade of the pine trees, and Harrison sauntered down the grassy slope that led to the water's edge, settling himself next to Beth's discarded clothes. She was splashing around in the middle of the pool, and it took her several moments to notice him sitting quietly on the bank.

"Come on in!" she said as she stood up in the waist-deep water, sweeping her matted hair over her shoulders. "It's beautiful!"

"It looks cold," Harrison answered with half a smile, reaching for an opened book that rested on the pile of clothes. The cloth binding was worn smooth, but even without the title, he recognized it as one of the old novels he had relegated to a place of disregard on the floor beneath the desk.

"I thought you were going to concentrate on the science books," he said, looking up as she waded toward the shore.

"I know," Beth laughed as she stepped onto the grass. "But there aren't any people in those books, and I want to know more about the people."

"But haven't I...."

"I know you've told me that these are just stories, but they're something like the truth, aren't they?" She sat

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down on the grass beside him, tossing her head back to catch the warmth on her face.

"I suppose so," Harrison answered quietly.

Beth looked over at him, catching a tone in his voice that she didn't understand. "You didn't walk down here to talk about my book, did you?"

"You're getting awfully good at that," he said, reading the puzzlement in her eyes.

Beth smiled but said nothing, waiting for an answer to her question.

"You're right," Harrison said after a long pause, turning the book over in his hand. "I think it's time to do some traveling again now that the good weather is here to stay."

Beth nodded, following his gaze down to the grass. "You're talking about hunting, aren't you, Harrison? Hunting the aliens?"

She stood and began to squeeze the water out of her hair with more than the necessary force as she stared at him through the heavy strands. "Why do you keep trying your luck, Harrison? You say you've killed twelve, but it can't last forever. One of these times you'll miss...and end up like Jarmane. Isn't that what you told me once?" She straightened up, pushing the hair out of her eyes as she tried to meet his gaze. "Why take the chance, Harrison? What difference does it make?"

He shook his head slowly, watching the water run in a tiny stream between her breasts. "I don't know...but I can't just wait here until I'm too old to hunt, and then quietly starve to death. What's the purpose in that?"

Harrison looked up at her, feeling his resolve melt away under the relentless pressure of her frown. He took a deep breath and shrugged in resignation as he said, "All right...no hunting this time. But there are provisions that we need...medical supplies, and maybe some new knives and tools. There are still some old towns to the west that I haven't explored, and if they've been empty since the aliens came, there's a good chance I can find what we need."

Beth held his gaze for a long moment, and then returned to the drying of her hair. "All right, if you say so. When do we leave?"

"We don't," he said softly. "I leave in the morning."

"But, Harrison..." she began before he silenced her with a hand on each shoulder.

"You don't know enough yet," he said as he shook his head, pressing harder on her shoulders. "You might make some mistake that gets us both killed, and for what?"

Beth nodded quickly and looked away, feeling his grip lighten as she did.

"I've stocked a two-month supply of venison in the cabin, and you've gotten to be a better fisherman than I ever was. You can spend the days just lying in the sun and reading, and maybe you'll even be a little smarter than me by the time I get back."

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"I think I am already," she said crossly as she slipped through his grasp and sat down in front of him. "How long will you be gone?"

"Forty days," he answered. "Maybe fifty. The farthest town is about ninety kilos from here according to the map, and most of the country is fairly rugged."

She nodded, drawing her knees up to her chest as a breeze moved past. "Fifty days alone...I don't think I'm going to like that."

Harrison knelt and reached for her clothes, pulling her cloak around her bare shoulders. "I was alone for seventeen years, and I survived. I think you can manage for a few weeks."

"All right," she said quietly, pulling the cloak a little tighter as she held his gaze. "I want to ask you something, Harrison. Before you disappear on me. I didn't want to do it this way, but if you're leaving in the morning...."

"What is it?" he asked with a frown.

Beth rose slowly, pushing the cloak off her shoulders. She stood very still, feeling the warmth of the sun on her back as she watched him looking at her.

"What's wrong with me, Harrison?"

He shook his head helplessly as the frown faded away.

"I know I'm not as nice as Jarmane ever was," she continued, looking down at herself and wishing that her hips were a little narrower and her legs a little longer. "But I'm not ugly. I know that, Harrison. Yet you've never touched me."

Harrison took a deep breath and turned toward the pool, trying to remember something he had read once long before.

"It's not you," he answered without looking at her.

"Then what?" She pulled on his shoulder, turning him so that she could see his face. It took her only a moment to read the answer in his eyes, and then she tried in vain to hide her smile. "It's you, isn't it, Harrison? You've never been with a woman."

He looked at her, trying to understand the smile as he searched for the words.

"I'm sorry..." he mumbled at last.

She laughed and took his hand, her eyes flashing in the sunlight. "There's nothing to be sorry about, Harrison. It just means that now there's something I can teach you."

She pulled herself close, and kissed him for the first time.

Harrison didn't leave the next morning, or the one after that. When he finally crossed the ridge and left the valley behind, he carried something with him that he had never carried before, though he soon recognized the uneasy shifting in the pit of his stomach as fear.

It wasn't a sickening fear of what might happen to him on journey that lay ahead, but a quiet fear that he

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might never return to that place, or touch the woman again. It was a different kind of burden, and he almost wished for a return to the old times when he had nothing of importance to leave behind and could hunt with deadly certainty that nothing mattered save that first arrow as it whispered off his bowstring.

And now the certainty was gone.

Harrison traveled slowly, taking twenty days to cover the hundred-odd kilometers of mountainous terrain before catching first glimpse of the town he sought. He supposed it had been a busy tourist trap in the years before the coming of the aliens, catering to the heavy traffic of skiers who had flocked to the mountain resorts. Now it was little more than two blocks of crumbling buildings engulfed in a sea of pines, and without the aid of the map he could easily have passed within a hundred meters in the daylight and never found it.

He made camp on a ridge that overlooked the town and the fallen bridge that marked one end of its busines district, spending a day of careful scouting through binoculars as he searched for any sign of life. When night had fallen, he circled the town as he hunted for worn paths or recent campsites, but in the end saw nothing that indicated the presence of humans for many months.

At dusk of the following day, Harrison stowed all of his gear in a shallow hole which he covered with a layer of fallen branches. He began the descent into the town with a deliberate pace designed to reach the outermost structures shortly after dark, and he was just beginning his exploration of the main street as a crescent moon rose over the trees on the eastern ridge.

He moved slowly, staying in the deepest shadows as he passed the vandalized and weather-worn remains of restaurants, rooming houses, and curio shops before he recognized the name of an old five-and-dime store in fading letters on a storefront. He peered into the shadows for several moments before taking a deep breath and stepping through the broken remains of the main window.

When his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he stalked the dusty aisles in search of the hardware section of the store. It too had been ransacked in the past, probably more than once, but among the toppled counters he found several steel knives and a short-handled ax, all of which he slipped into his shoulder pouch.

He left the five-and-dime, passing several buildings before another window caught his attention. Most of the glass had somehow remained unbroken through all the years, and several headless figures were dimly visible through the dirty panes, still draped with the latest women's fashions of two decades before. Harrison pressed close against the glass as he gazed at the delicate cuts of material, trying to imagine them on Beth's rugged body.

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The dresses were ridiculously impractical, and he doubted that any of the wispy folds could have survived a single day's travel in the woods. But they called back memories of other times, and he soon found himself inside the store, gently pushing several of the sturdier dresses into the pouch.

It took another half hour to locate the town's only drugstore, and at first glance Harrison had little hope of finding any usable medical supplies inside. The main window had long since been scattered in a thousand pieces, allowing the rain and snow to invade the front portion of the store and rot everything they touched. He picked his way through the garbage until he found a small corner in the rear that had remained dry. The shelves had been toppled and their contents scattered across the floor, but many of the labels were still readable.

Deciding that the situation warranted the expenditure of a precious match, Harrison pulled a small box from inside his cloak, and soon a small fire flickered in the middle of the floor. He began to sort through the piles of containers, working until he'd located several bottles of rubbing alcohol, iodine, aspirin, as well as a few rolls of surgical dressing, all of which disappeared into the porch.

The horizon to the east was turning grey as Harrison stepped from the store with the pouch of supplies slung over his shoulder. He hurried along the empty street, keeping close against the buildings until he plunged into the safety of the forest. He was dead tired when he finally stumbled into the clearing he had made his campsite, and he dropped heavily to the ground with his back against a small boulder, resting with half-open eyes.

He listened to the morning wind rustle through the branches overhead, gradually becoming aware of a feeling that tightened the muscles of his spine and drove away the fatigue. He sat up, scrutinizing his surroundings for whatever had set his nerves on edge, and though there was nothing he could put a finger on, he began to realize that someone had been in the clearing during his absence.

Harrison pushed himself to his feet and crossed the clearing to where he had hidden the rest of his supplies, staring intently at the covering of branches before deciding that they'd been moved. He lifted them carefully, not really sure of what he expected to find underneath, but he was surprised to find his gear intact. Yet again, not quite the way he'd left it, as if someone had carefully examined everything before returning it to the hiding place.

Harrison fitted an arrow to his bow, returning to his seat by the boulder as he tried to think. It made no sense that he could see, for if someone had actually been there, why hadn't they stolen his gear, or at least his extra knife and some food? The other possiblity was an alien, but why one would concern itself with what he'd hidden,

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he couldn't imagine. Nor could he guess why it wouldn't have waited for him to return, and even then be attacking.

The sun was well off the horizon when he gave up the riddle, gathering his belongings as he made a cursory search for footprints other than his own. He found nothing and finally left the clearing with the uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched by someone even better at the game than he.

Harrison traveled hard for the rest of the day, cutting a trail that brought him to the crest of some nameless ridge an hour before sunset. The place was high and open, dangerous in terms of any aliens that might be hunting in the area, but for the moment they weren't his chief concern. With a plan already set in his mind, he prepared a hasty camp, complete with a small lean-to built from fallen branches. He stored his gear in the shelter and spent a long moment scrutinizing his work before he shouldered his bow, slipping quietly into the woods.

Back-tracking his own path proved more difficult than he expected, for the ground along the slope of the ridge was much rougher than that along the crest, and night had fallen before he arrived at the place he had chosen earlier in the afternoon. He pulled a piece of dried venison from the shoulder pouch and settled down to wait.

Within an hour the quiet footsteps sounded in the forest, finally materializing into a single figure moving slowly through the darkness. It passed within thirty meters of his hiding place and continued along the track, melting quickly into the shadows. Harrison waited until the footsteps were barely audible before he left his cover and assumed the role of tracker, fitting an arrow into his bow as he moved.

It took almost half the night for the silent shape to reach the camp he had prepared, and there it halted, staring at the lean-to from the edge of the trees. Harrison closed in from behind until he was within certain killing distance for his bow, bracing himself against a tree before he called out.

"Don't move!"

The form stiffened but didn't turn, and when Harrison was satisfied he continued, "Now raise your arms...straight out from your sides!"

Again the stranger complied, standing motionless for a long interval before he said, "You can relax your weapon...I'm no threat."

Harrison frowned, moving forward without loosening the bowstring. "Why are you following me?" he asked harshly.

"I assure you that I mean you no harm," the stranger answered, turning slightly as Harrison came to a stop ten paces behind him. "I needed to know whether or not you're one of the people I'm looking for."

The head turned further, and Har-

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rison saw the moonlight fall across the grey hair and wrinkled skin, realizing that he had been tracked by an old man. He relaxed the bowstring, dropping it to his side as he stared at the weathered face.

"You're damn good, old man," he said, shaking his head. "I was raised in these woods, and you're the first who could ever stay with me if I didn't want them to."

The old man laughed quietly, letting his arms drop to his sides. "And you cover yourself better than any man I've ever tracked."

Harrison nodded, extending a hand as he said, "My name is Harrison."

The old man accepted the handshake, returning it with a brief, powerful grip. "I'm Menzel...Jacob Menzel."

Harrison motioned toward the clearing, letting Menzel lead the way. He rested his bow and sling against the lean-to and sat down, watching as the old man did the same a few feet away. Harrison pulled a slab of venison from his shoulder pouch, cutting off a thick slice and offering it to Menzel.

"I could use a bite," Menzel said with a nod. "You don't leave a man much time for hunting when you travel."

Harrison watched him eat, waiting until he had finished before he leaned forward and said, "Now I'll ask you again...why were you following me?"

Menzel pulled out a canteen and took a long mouthful of water before returning his gaze to the younger man.

"I was telling the truth when I answered before," he said. "I'm looking for a group of people, and I wanted to know if you were one of them." He paused a moment before asking, "Are you?"

Harrison shook his head as he answered, "I don't know who it is you're after, but I'm certainly not one of them. I've been alone since the aliens came."

Menzel stared hard for several seconds and then relaxed against a boulder behind him. "Well...I suppose it couldn't be so easy."

"Just where are these people?" Harrison asked. "In these mountains?"

"I don't really know," Menzel answered as he took a deep breath of the cool air. "All I know is that they're somewhere up north...at least north of where I used to be." He looked at the other man, catching the confusion on his face. "Let me explain from the beginning before you get the idea that I'm crazier than I am sane, though sometimes I wonder myself...." He trailed off with a quiet laugh before looking up.

"I'm from Denver," he began, "at least that's where I lived when the bastards came. I was on a hunting trip in the foothills of the De Cristo range south of Denver when it happened, and it was a full week before I got the news from people running south. At first I didn't believe it, but there were too many people to deny, and I finally spent an entire day sitting by the side

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of a highway...just letting it settle in." He looked up and caught Harrison's gaze in the darkness. "And the funny part was...I didn't care. I didn't care at all."

"What about your family?" Harrison asked as he watched the other man remember.

"I had none," Menzel said quickly. "All I left behind was a few friends I didn't really like and a job I hated." He laughed suddenly, leaning forward on his crossed legs. "Do you know what I did for a living, Harrison? I sold used cars." The laughter came again, and it was several minutes before he wiped his eyes and leaned back against the rock. "I didn't think the invasion would do much for my business. So I went back to the mountains, found myself a reasonably safe cave, and did my damndest to stay alive." He watched a frown spread across the younger man's face before he asked, "My story isn't so different from yours, is it?"

"Maybe not," Harrison answered. "But the De Cristo range is almost five hundred kilometers from here. You're a long way from home."

"I am," Menzel said with a nod. "That part of the story began about ten years ago, or maybe even longer. You see, there used to be a fair-sized traffic in people across the De Cristos, Probably the outflow from all the suburbias in the midwest. I crossed paths with some of the smaller groups occasionally, and I began to hear rumors of a large group of people to the north who had formed sometime after the initial invasion and had learned to fight the aliens."

Menzel paused a moment, sifting the memories before he continued. "At first, I put it down as nothing more than the wishful thinking of desperate fools, but the rumors didn't die. They were always the same...and the group of people was always somewhere up north. Never south, or west, or east. The accounts were never first-hand, though; so I couldn't get any detailed information beyond a compass direction.

"The years passed, and the flow of people across the De Cristos thinned to almost nothing. I met fewer and talked to less than that, but every so often the story would surface again, though I had heard it so many times that it didn't even grab my interest any more." Menzel paused, looking up to meet Harrison's interested gaze. "And then I finally met a man who claimed to have been a part of this group himself."

"What did he say?" Harrison asked after the silence had lengthened unbearably.

"Not a great deal," Menzel said with an air of satisfaction at having drawn the question. "He was an old man, and why he was heading north in the middle of winter, he never said. He had been tracked by an alien along the way...and I happened across him a few seconds after the damned thing had cut him down. I managed to kill the alien

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with one good shot, but by the time I reached the old man he was almost dead, and he was chattering about a hundred different things. Trying to squeeze the rest of a life's worth of talking into a few minutes, I guess. Right before the end, he started in about a city in the north that was safe for humans...that the aliens couldn't touch. He called it his home." Menzel drifted into silence, plucking a small branch off the ground at his feet. "Then he died."

Harrison thought in silence for several minutes, weighing his own reactions to what Menzel had described. "And you made this journey because of those few words?" he asked at last.

"No," Menzel replied with a shake of his head. "The words were only the beginning. That all happened three winters ago, and for the three years since I thought about what he'd said. The rational part of me finally decided that there probably wasn't anything to it, no matter what I wanted to believe."

"But you're here," Harrison returned quickly.

"I'm here because I finally realized that I'm an old man too," Menzel said as he cast the branch into the shadows on the far side of the clearing. "When you spend so many years alone, without ever seeing your own face in a mirror, or watching the faces of the people around you, it's easy to forget about the changes. For all those years I thought I was the same man who left for a hunting trip that Friday afternoon, and if some ache ever cropped up to tell me otherwise, I always managed to overlook the truth.

"And then one day this past winter, I came across a sheet of ice as smooth and perfect as any mirror ever was. I saw my own face, Harrison. For the first time in almost twenty years, I saw my own face, and I knew I was old. I realized that I didn't have many more years in me, and sooner than I'd like to admit, this journey would be impossible, even if I'd wanted to make the effort. I had to make the attempt now...or accept the fact that I never would." Menzel fell silent, watching the face of his questioner.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Harrison?" he asked quietly.

Harrison shook his head, staring through the old man as something stirred in his own memory. "You're no crazier than anyone who's still alive in this world."

"Then you'll tell me what you know," Menzel said quickly. "About the people I'm looking for."

"I don't know anything to tell," Harrison answered slowly. "I've stayed away from people as best I could, since most I've seen looked as dangerous as the aliens. I haven't heard any stories, Menzel. I'm sorry."

The old man shrugged and took another deep breath. "Nothing to be sorry for, friend. I'm the one chasing the wild goose. I suppose the only thing to do is keep moving northward

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and hope to find someone who knows more than you or me." He hesitated a few seconds before he continued, "Would you care to come along, my friend? I can't promise what we'll find, but it might prove very interesting."

Harrison looked down at the ground, surprised by the question and the sudden curiosity it aroused in him. He had already begun to weigh the practicalities of such an endeavor when Beth came crashing into his thoughts.

"I wish I could," Harrison said quietly, still avoiding the other man's gaze.

"But why can't you?" Menzel asked with a trace of urgency. "We're both alone, and there's no point in merely staying alive until an alien finally tracks you or you starve because you're too slow or too blind to hunt."

Harrison shook his head and glanced up, feeling a stab of pity for the old man. "You may be right, but I guess...."

"I understand," Menzel said, returning his gaze for a moment before he began to spread his cloak on the ground. "You're just not that desperate yet, and I can't blame you for common sense."

Menzel stretched out on the cloak with a relaxed sigh, using his back pack as a pillow. "Perhaps we can hunt together in the morning before I move on."

Harrison watched him settle in before he crawled into the lean-to and collapsed on the ground. He hadn't slept in two days, but sleep wasn't quick in coming. He spent a long while on his back, listening to the summer wind moving over the ridge and wondering how much of his own future he could see in Menzel's tired eyes.

They spent most of the morning to follow on a long, meandering walk that produced little save a few lost arrows, and a host of stories of the time before the aliens. Harrison listened with fascination to all that Menzel had seen and done, amazed at how little he had really known about the world as it had been. Noon had long since passed when they returned to the clearing, the air ringing with Menzel's laughter at some remembered incident.

He looked at Harrison for several moments, catching his breath before he said, "I suppose it's time we went our ways, my friend. I've spent three days of tracking just to find that you're not what I'm after." He smiled and held out a hand, accepting Harrison's reluctant handshake.

"Take care of yourself, Menzel," Harrison said quietly. "You know where to find me if you ever change your mind about all this."

Menzel laughed as he lifted the pack onto his shoulders. "I appreciate the offer, but I hope it never sounds good to me. I'd like to see this one thing through to the end, just to prove that I can do it." He smiled again and gazed off at the horizon to the north.

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"Take care, Harrison, and if it's an alien that kills you, make sure it feels your arrow in the exchange."

Menzel shifted the pack again, nodding at the younger man as he started across the clearing, and a moment later he was lost among the trees.

Harrison gathered his own gear and left just as quickly, descending the southern slope of the ridge as he started for home. There was impatience in his stride, and he found himself paying less attention to the business of traveling as his thoughts strayed to the stories Menzel had told. His curiosity soon settled heavily on the city in the north, growing by leaps and bounds as his imagination worked on the riddle, and he began to regret his self-imposed isolation of the years past. Perhaps he might have heard the same rumors and begun the search many years before, and perhaps he might already have found the answer Menzel still sought.

The warm days passed slowly, but the weather remained dry, making the traveling easy. Harrison put himself on an eighteen-hour schedule, covering more than twenty miles a day between late afternoon and early morning, while he slept during the midday heat. He was tired of the journey in a way he had never been before, and he grew less careful as the miles slipped by underfoot. He made mistakes of negligence, recognizing them as soon as they were made, but counting just once on luck to help him home.

Harrison stepped onto the banks of the Colorado River early one morning after a long night's walk, surprised that he had so quickly reached the northern boundary of his familiar territory. He collapsed on a slope of soft grass, letting the gentle roar of the water lull him into a light sleep. Home was only two days of travel ahead of him, and across the river lay terrain as familiar as the mountain valley where Beth was waiting. The sleep deepened as he relaxed, and he never heard the rustle on the wind or saw the flash of silver wings circling high in the morning sky.

Harrison woke suddenly at the pain, his head still filled with a dream, and for a few moments he thought he was home, watching Beth from the bank of the pond. Reality descended around him at the second stab of pain, and he opened his eyes to see the black form standing thirty paces away on the river bank.

Harrison swallowed hard as the fear swept over him, but it quickly gave way to hate as he realized the game the alien was playing. He got slowly to his knees, never shifting his gaze from the dark visor of the pressure suit as he reached for the bow lying next to him on the grass. At this movement, the thin black arms were twisted into the tangle that heralded the coming of the killing thought.

He felt the smooth wood of the bow in his hand, squeezing with all his might as he braced for the pain. He

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couldn't die now, not without seeing Beth again. His heart pounded in anger, and he closed his eyes, filling his mind with the woman until there was nothing but her face and the ache in his hand as he clasped the bow.

A moment later, his brain exploded in a flash of light and pain as the killing thought arrived, sending him sprawling backward on the grass. Every muscle in his body tensed, forcing the breath from his lungs as he opened his mouth in a silent scream. The pain lasted an eternity before it began to fade, and he lay still on the ground, listening to the blood pounding in his ears. He waited for it to stop, signaling his own death, but it stayed strong and steady.

He took a hesitant breath, and then another, finally filling his lungs with the cool air as he sat up. His ears were ringing, and the ground seemed to shift beneath his feet as he stood and pulled an arrow from the sling over his shoulder. The alien stood motionless with its arms still locked across the narrow chest, seemingly transfixed by the impossible.

"That's right. I'm alive, you bastard," Harrison grunted as he fitted the arrow. His hands shook and the bow suddenly weighed as much as a tree, but he brought it up, watching the alien down the shaft of the arrow.

"I'm alive!" he called above the sound of the river, but still the black form made no move. Harrison relaxed the bowstring just a little, taking a faltering step up the slope. He clenched his teeth with every breath, expecting the sudden pain of another killing thought to come crashing in at any moment, but it never did.

A moment later the wind gusted across the river, and Harrison watched in disbelief as the alien toppled silently onto the grass. He struggled up the slope and stared down at the body, searching for some sign of movement beneath the glistening material. Even then he couldn't believe what he saw, and so he let his arrow fly from a distance of two paces, watching as it pinned the corpse to the soft ground.

The ringing welled up again in his ears as the bow became too heavy to hold, and Harrison slumped forward, the roar of the water melting beneath the noise in his head.

The rise to consciousness was slow, and Harrison spent a long while in the darkness behind closed eyes as he tried to remember. He listened for the sound of the river but heard nothing, not even the wind moving through the trees on the shore. The ground beneath him was unaccountably soft, and he couldn't smell the grass. He opened his eyes in startled confusion, staring into the shadows above him for several moments before he recognized the ceiling over his own bed.

He struggled onto one elbow, glancing around the empty cabin as he fought with his stubborn memory. He

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had expected to awaken by the river, with the corpse of the alien a few steps away, and instead he was home. He turned as the door opened, filling the room with a wash of brilliant daylight.

"Harrison!" Beth cried, dropping an armload of wood as she hurried to the bed. She sat down beside him, holding his face in her hands as she stared into his dazed eyes. "How do you feel, Harrison? Can you talk?"

Harrison held up a hand to stop the string of questions, managing a weak smile. "How did I get here, Beth?"

"I found you outside three mornings ago, not five steps from the door. I thought you were sick." She leaned back, reaching for a canteen resting on the writing table. "Is that what it was, Harrison? Were you sick?"

He shook his head slowly, accepting the help of her hand as she supported his head to take a drink. He realized his thirst the moment the cool water touched his throat, and he drank steadily for half a minute before releasing the canteen and meeting her gaze.

"It was an alien," he said quietly.

Beth wiped away a droplet of water on his chin, the concern on her face giving way to exasperation. "You said you weren't going to hunt them this time...and you made me believe it."

Harrison shook his head again, taking hold of her hand. "It hunted me, Beth. I got careless...it tracked me and attacked by the river, two days north of here."

"It...it attacked you?" she asked, her voice suddenly quiet. "But you're...."

"Alive," he said, finishing the thought. "I don't know exactly what happened, Beth. It sent a killing thought, and I felt it hit. It was like being run down by a mountain, but I was alive. I got up...but it was already dead when I put an arrow through it." Harrison relaxed back on the bed as the weakness of the three-day fast caught up with him. "It was already dead...and then I collapsed. I don't remember any more."

Beth shook her head quickly, pressing a cool hand onto his forehead. "It doesn't matter, just so you're here and safe. I'm going to fix you something to eat, and then you're going to sleep until you feel strong enough to walk." She stood up, and Harrison noticed that her cloak of leather had been replaced by one of the dresses he had found in the town. Beth followed his gaze, running her hands across the smooth material.

"I thought you brought it for me," she murmured with an embarrassed smile.

"Do you like it?" Harrison asked.

"It's beautiful, Harrison. I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen or felt. It's just like the pictures in the books."

Harrison returned her smile, closing his eyes as he committed the look on her face to his memory. A thousand things floated through his tired mind,

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but what soon rose above all else were the tangled recollections of those fleeting moments by the river. He knew that some portion of the images were wrong, but the answer was hovering in the shadows beyond his grasp, and it would remain there for the moment. The sound of Beth moving around the room became a reassuring lullaby, and Harrison was soon lost in a contented sleep.

Harrison was sitting on a small bench outside the door of the cabin, basking in the afternoon sun as he pored over an open book. Before him lay a detailed map of the continent, and he was too lost in its intricacies to hear his name called the first time.

"Harrison," Beth repeated as she came up beside him, bending over his shoulder. "Another map? This is the first day you've been well enough to come outside since you got back, and all you can do is read maps."

Harrison looked up and smiled as he closed the book, motioning for her to take a seat beside him. "Tell me something, Beth. During all the years when you were traveling with other groups, did you ever hear stories about a city in the north? A place that was safe from the aliens?"

Beth frowned as she thought. Something had sparked at his question, but it took several seconds to chase down the elusive memory.

"There was one time," she said as she looked up. "It was a long time ago, and Jarmane and I were with some people who lived along the Lone Tree River...at least that's what they called it. We used to move up and down this one stretch of the river, and there were always groups of people coming from the east."

"And one of those people passing through told you a story?" Harrison prodded when the silence had carried too long.

"A group of men," Beth said with a nod. "They called themselves soldiers and said they were traveling north to find a..." She stammered a moment before the word came out, "...a fortress."

Beth looked at Harrison, shrugging at his frown. "That may not be the right word."

"No...it makes sense," he said, reopening the book. "It might make more sense than anything Menzel told me."

"Menzel?" she asked.

"He's an old man I ran across on the trip up north. He was on his way north, looking for a city of people who'd learned to fight the aliens."

"A city? Where is it, Harrison?" Beth asked excitedly.

"He didn't know," Harrison answered, returning his attention to the map. "Only that every story he'd ever heard put it somewhere in the north. I thought he was crazy, since a city of any size couldn't have gone untouched by the aliens for so long. But now...." He began to trace along the upper portion of the map with one finger. "What

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you said may change things."

"What do you mean?" Beth asked, leaning closer to his shoulder.

"A fortress...not a city," Harrison said. "Before the aliens came, there was a whole string of military installations across the Midwest. Missle silos, radar and communications networks, and probably a few bases that no one outside of the Pentagon ever knew about."

"And you think the soldiers were talking about one of those places?"

"Maybe," Harrison said with a long breath. "Maybe they were all crazy, including Menzel."

"But that's not what you believe, is it, Harrison?" She watched him for a while before she asked; "This old man you met. Would you have gone with him if I wasn't here?"

He looked at her, finally shaking his head. "I don't know. I might have."

Beth nodded, looking away as the wind moved through the clearing. "Do you still want to go?" she asked, wishing that the uncertainty hadn't been so obvious in his voice.

"It's not that simple, Beth," Harrison said, gently taking her chin in his hand. "I want to believe that all I'll ever want is to pass the seasons here with you and maybe try to pretend that the rest of the world is the way it used to be. I want to do that...but I don't know if I can." He held her gaze, trying to read the thoughts behind the pale blue eyes.

"It might work for a while, but I can't promise that I'll never come to the place that Menzel finally reached, and if I wait until I'm as old as he was, I'll be nothing more than another old man trying to do the impossible."

"What will you be now, Harrison?" she asked sharply, trying to hide the pleading in her eyes. "Is it better to be a young man trying to do the impossible."

"I'm not a young man," Harrison said with a slow shake of his head.

"You're not an old man either, Harrison. We can have a long time together here. We can have all there is to be had in a world like this, but not if you're dead."

Harrison let his gaze fall away from hers as the silence lengthened.

"Damn it!" she said, jumping to her feet. "You don't even know where the city is...or if it exists at all. It might be nothing more than stories, Harrison. Just stories."

He came slowly to his feet, drawing her close and feeling a trace of resistance until their bodies touched. "I need time to think, Beth. Maybe a long time. All I ask is that you never be surprised if one day I have to make the effort." He stroked her hair for a moment before he continued softly, "Does that seem too unfair?"

"I'll wait," she said. "I'll wait until you know what it is you expect from yourself...and me."

The last weeks of summer passed quickly, and Harrison made no further

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mention of the city in the north, though it was never buried too deeply in his thoughts. He studied the maps often in the afternoon, making a long list of mental notes as he weighed the various possibilities. The lure of the unknown was strong, but the comfort of his life there with Beth was stronger, and the first signs of autumn finally arrived to put an end to thoughts of a northward journey that year.

For Beth, the summer died slowly. The high mountain valley had become a haven of safety that neither human nor alien could breach, and she decided that there was nothing more in life for her to seek. Yet she saw that Harrison still studied the maps, and though he never talked of it, she knew the questions were very much alive inside of him...Torn between her own happiness and his curiosity, she watched the warm weather fade and welcomed the coming of winter to settle the question, at least for a while.

The first afternoon to bring an autumn crispness found her by the pond, her gaze fixed on the lower slopes of the mountain where the trees were slipping into the evening shadows. A book lay unopened on the grass beside her as her thoughts strayed northward to the uncertainty of the future. She was wondering where she and Harrison would be when another summer had come and gone, her imagination running wild and unbridled when the flash of light jumped from the high blue sky.

Beth stiffened and rose to her feet, shielding the sun with one hand as she tried to find it again. Her heart pounded as she waited, and even before the flash came a second time, she knew. She watched it for a long, terrible moment, the tears coming to her eyes as she recognized the end of her paradise.

"God, no!" she whispered, and then bolted up the path toward the cabin.

Harrison was reading on the bench when she broke through the trees, her breath coming in frightened gasps as she stumbled across the clearing.

"I saw it, Harrison!" she said, falling to her knees on matted grass as she struggled to catch her breath. "I saw it...close!"

"Saw what, Beth?" Harrison asked as he closed the book and let it drop to the ground.

"One of them...in the air. I saw the light coming off the wings." She looked up at him, sobbing quietly. "It knows we're here, Harrison. It knows."

He turned and began to scan the sky above the trees as he took hold of her hand. "It might just be on a flight over the mountains...."

"No!" she cried with a frenzied shake of her head. "It was low...coming down. It knows, Harrison!"

"All right," he said quietly, pulling her to her feet. "Maybe it knows. I want you to listen carefully and do exactly what I tell you. Understand?"

Beth nodded as he squeezed her

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shoulders for a moment.

"Good. Now go inside and get my bow and sling and put on your winter cloak." He held her gaze a moment longer and then moved her gently toward the cabin.

When she was inside, he turned his attention back to the sky while the plan took shape. There was only one way, and perhaps even that had been circumvented by the swiftness of the alien's approach. Harrison knew he should have felt the sting of fear at the realization, for it probably meant his death, but it was something else that brought a frown to his face as Beth emerged from the cabin. With a sudden rush of surprise, he knew this had happened to him before, though there were no memories save the unmistakable feeling of familiarity.

Beth was standing in front of him, the bow and a sling of arrows clasped tight against her chest. Her cheeks were moist from crying, but the flow of tears had stopped as she watched Harrison's outward calm.

"I'm afraid, Harrison," she said softly. "God, I'm afraid."

"I know," he answered as he took the bow from her hand and pulled the heavy cloak up over her shoulders. "Now listen to me, Beth. Listen to me and it'll all be over soon."

She nodded, closing her eyes as she fought back her own terror, and listened.

* * *

Chrysolan walked slowly through the thicket of trees that filled the mountain valley, its mind filled with the fear surging from the prey. When the clearing was just visible through the trees, the Khyma stopped as its uncertainty rose to an uncomfortable level. This fear was strong, and of a kind it had felt on a thousand other kills, yet there had been none at the place by the river.

A few moments of calculation produced the obvious conclusion; there were two, and one had yet to be touched. The three arms fell limp as the Khyma opened its mind in stages, until finally the layer of fear was too powerful to be felt. There had to be something else, something quieter, and it stood for a long while in the deepening shadows of early evening as it searched and finally found.

Chrysolan spent several moments, absorbing the trace coming down from the ridge, and then continued on through the woods. The trees thinned until a hunched form came into view, sitting before a low structure of stone. The stratagem was clever and quite unexpected.

Beth looked up at the sound of movement, gasping at the sight of the towering black form standing just beyond the edge of the clearing. She stared in fascination at the smooth visor, her fear rising to an unbearable peak before it faded as she realized the inevitable. She waited for the pain, but felt only sadness for all the times with

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Harrison that would never be.

"Why don't you get it done?" she said quietly from the bench. "Why don't...."

Her head exploded in a wash of light as the alien gave a twitch of its mid-arm, and she never even felt the ground as she fell.

From his vantage point on the ridge, Harrison saw her collapse as he silently cursed his own arrogance. The alien had seen the trap and remained in the safety of the trees.

He relaxed the bow and stumbled down the slope toward the cabin, his attention fixed on the motionless form of the woman. He ran clear of the trees and came up beside her, kneeling down without thought of the alien that had to be nearby.

Beth's hand was still warm, and as he rolled her gently onto her back, the shallow rise and fall of her chest was obvious through the cloak of furs. Harrison stared in disbelief as he realized that she wasn't dead, his grip tightening on the bow at the sound of careful footsteps behind him. He came slowly to his feet, turning to meet the sight of the alien stepping clear of the trees.

Chrysolan halted ten paces from the human, watching as it absorbed the confusion of emotions that sprang forth. They came too numerous and too swift to sort, but none was fear, and so the first of the questions was answered.

This was the chosen prey.

They exchanged a steady gaze, and for a long while there was no sound but the wind moving through the trees. Finally, the Khyma tired of the wait, sending a careful probe into the mind of the human.

"It was you!" Harrison said suddenly, feeling as if a curtain had been drawn aside in a corner of his memory. "You killed the alien by the river...before my arrow touched it." He stared up at the featureless face, his surprise giving way to confusion.

"But why would you save my life?" he asked as he took a hesitant step forward. "Can you understand me?"

"Yes," came the reply, crashing into his head with a force that crossed the threshold of pain.

Harrison staggered backward in bewilderment, his hand tightening on the shaft of the bow, as if searching for some reminder of normality.

"You are surprised that we may communicate," Chrysolan thought, straining to keep the power of the contact at a level bearable to the other. "You are surprised that I have not killed."

"Yes," Harrison answered out loud, though he realized the alien was discerning his thoughts before they made the transition into words. "Yes, I'm surprised. It was you that killed the alien by the river, then."

"It was," Chrysolan replied, anticipating the question to follow.

"But why?" Harrison asked, glancing down at Beth for a moment before

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he continued. "Why be concerned with one life after the destruction of a civilization?"

"Your civilization was of little value," Chrysolan returned quickly. "As an individual, however, you have exhibited traits unusual for your heritage, and I was curious."

"My heritage?" Harrison asked, shaken to hear all of humanity cast aside so lightly. "What gave you the right to judge my heritage...or my civilization? What gave you the right to destroy what you didn't understand?"

The Khyma paused a moment, intrigued by the sudden flow of energy. "There is no judgment," it replied at last. "There is only circumstance. As for the lack of understanding, that is your own ignorance of what lies beyond the confines of this planet."

"Then you can see the future?" Harrison asked, the anger cutting deep in his voice. "And you can judge all that we might have done...if given the chance?"

"That is not necessary," Chrysolan thought, noting the sudden change in the human's energy pattern. "The basis of your life and your intelligence decreed that your future would be bounded by walls too great for you to scale. You carry a curse that binds your mind to the physical reality which spawned your race."

"A curse?" Harrison asked quietly, the anger supplanted by his own curiosity.

"You call it passion," Chrysolan thought with a trace of regret. "It is the force that binds you to the other at your feet and pulled you from the safety of the forest at the risk of your own life. It springs from the chemistry of your evolution, and while it has given you attributes to insure survival on this planet, it will blind you forever to the truth of the universe."

Harrison absorbed the alien's thoughts with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment, feeling for all the world as if he'd been scolded by a parent. The silence in his head continued, and at last he realized that it was still waiting for something.

"You saved my life to tell me these things?" Harrison asked as he sat down on the grass with the bow resting across his knees.

The Khyma looked down at him for a long moment, probing through the dimming light as it answered. "This planet will be yours again in a short while, though for how long, I do not know. I wished to understand you before I left, for I will not be here again."

"You're leaving?" Harrison asked with an empty laugh. "It's that simple? You sweep in to destroy and then leave what's left to die from ignorance?"

"We leave because we are forced," Chrysolan returned quickly. "We are forced because there is a kind stronger than ourselves."

"You mean...a war?"

The Khyma hesitated as it probed

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for the exact meaning of the word, and several moments passed before it answered. "Your language does not possess an adequate means of description, but war is a frail approximation."

"And what did this planet have to do with your war?" Harrison asked harshly as he shifted his grip on the bow.

"It was a place of rest for the warriors," Chrysolan answered. "A place of rest to recover the powers necessary for the struggle."

"Then the hunting..." Harrison said softly as he got to his feet. "The hunting was for sport."

Chrysolan took another few seconds to decipher his meaning, but then returned no answer, absorbing the disorganized emanations in silence.

"For sport, damn you!" Harrison whispered hoarsly as he brought the bow smoothly to arm's length, ready to strike. He held his breath, waiting for the beginning of a killing thought as he concentrated on the spot on the alien's chest where the arrow would hit.

Chrysolan remained motionless, totally absorbed by the intricate battle being waged in the mind of the human. For one fleeting moment, the Khyma recognized the possibility of an error in judgment, but at last the bowstring slackened, and the fire went out of Harrison's thoughts.

"Damn you," he muttered as he let the bow drop to his side. "How did you know that I wouldn't kill you?"

"There are scenes in *Worlds* I suppose I will remember forever."
—STEPHEN KING

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"You survived," Chrysolan answered. It made a swift motion with its mid-arm, and Beth uttered a sigh as she opened her eyes.

Harrison knelt by her side, brushing back her hair as she blinked in confusion, and when he looked up again, the alien was a dwindling shadow sliding into the trees. Just as it was lost to view in the darkness, the now familiar tingle sprang up in his head.

"The place you seek is real...and now you will know the way," Chrysolan thought. "Find it soon."

Harrison remained on his knees, staring into the darkness as he waited for something else, but his mind was again his own. Beth stirred beside him, sitting up as she followed his gaze into the shadows and tried to remember.

"Where is it, Harrison?" she asked at last. "Did you kill it?"

"No," he answered as he looked down at her, slowly shaking his head. "This time, there wasn't any honor in the kill...for anyone."

"I wish we didn't have to leave," Beth said quietly as they stood at the crest of the valley, watching the early morning sun redden the pines.

Harrison made no reply as he stared down at the grove of trees that hid the cabin from view. For a long minute, he was lost to himself.

"This place has been my life," he said at last. "But I don't want to measure my life by a valley I can cross with a single arrow."

Beth watched him carefully as he turned to face her, squinting into the low sunlight.

"I still don't understand everything, Harrison," she said. "I don't understand why it would talk to you rather than just kill us, and I don't understand why you trust what it said."

Harrison shook his head, smiling for a moment at the way her eyes caught the light. He had spent three days struggling with those questions, and in the end, all he had for an answer was the need to leave the valley and discover what remained of the world.

"It wouldn't have tracked me down just to tell a few lies," he said when he realized she was still waiting for an answer.

"But all the other times...all the other people...."

"I don't know," Harrison said as he shifted the pack on his shoulders. "When you can kill so well, it must be easy to never ask what you're killing. Maybe none of them ever stopped to ask until a few days ago."

Beth glanced over her shoulder one last time so that the memory of the place would always be clear, and then she looked at Harrison with a smile of resolution.

"We can really find the city?" she asked.

"We'll find it," he answered, starting down the slope.

"And then what?" she called over his shoulder.

"We start to make a difference."

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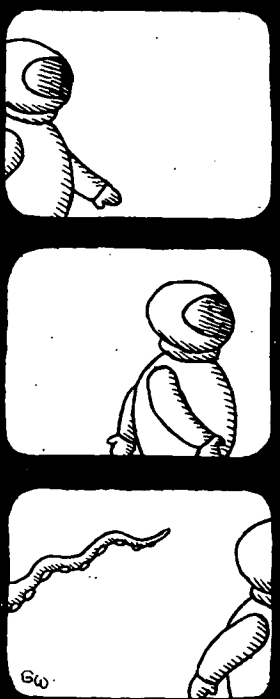
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

CORNED BEEF FLASH

Flash Gordon is a problem, mainly because it's such a blah film that one is hard put to find anything much to say about it. But being the resourceful type, I will make a valiant effort to ramble on.

It's not a bad film; it's so inoffensively, mindlessly harmless that one doesn't have the heart to shred it. It's corny, but not in any particularly amusing way; the camp elements are there, but nothing is made of them. The effects aim at the spectacular, and miss most of the time, but they don't miss spectacularly; they're just off enough to look fake but still costly.

For those of you who were bored by the whole idea of yet another comic-strip inspired space opera, and didn't bother, let me say that the film follows the original plot line of the strip pretty faithfully as I remember it. The Earth is being bombarded by rays (here hot hail and other uninspired natural disasters) from outer space. The mad (or at least slightly annoyed) Dr. Zarkov kidnaps sports hero Flash Gordon and lovely Dale Arden in his home-made rocket ship and crash lands them on the planet Mongo, from whence the destructive influences come.

It is ruled by Ming, Emperor of the Universe, who has a slinky daughter, Princess Aura. There are also lots of dissident elements, such as the winged humanoid hawkmen and a band of pas-

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toral (or arboreal) Robin Hoodlum types led by one Prince Barin. Ming pursues Dale, Aura pursues Flash, all three Earthlings get chased from one faction to another trying to get the Mongolese (well, you *can't* call them Mongols — there's enough subliminal propoganda about the Yellow Peril here already) to get their act together and revolt. Chase, capture, chase, capture, chase, capture, and who's on first?

The actors are a little more interesting than the material, at least on the second level. Sam J. Jones, as Flash, doesn't really work. At first glance, he looks OK, beefcake figure, strong chin, and all that. But close up, things go wrong. The bleach job (Flash must be blond, of course) jars; Jones is obviously a brunet type. The face looks like Johnboy Walton's, overinflated, too sensitive for a hero's. The voice is too light. Jones isn't bad, but he's just not the 30s macho male needed.

Melody Anderson as Dale is a disaster. She comes on like Gilda Radner playing Lillian Gish, and ends up with the worst aspects of both, simpering and vulgar at the same time.

The trouble with Timothy Dalton as Prince Barin is that Timothy Dalton looks exactly as I've always pictured Tolkien's Beren, which was confusing. So was Augustus Caesar (Brian Blessed, of *I, Claudius*) as the leader of the hawkmen, all fur and feathers. Thank goodness Max von Sydow as Ming didn't look at all as he did in *his* most famous role, Christ, in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Ornella Muti slunk very nicely as Princess Aura.

I wanted to like the design of the film (sets, costumes, effects, etc.) more than I did. It's that odd sort of combination deco and Baroque, much closer to the drawings of the original Buck Rogers than the Flash Gordon art. The ships, for instance, all had lightning flash paint jobs and lots of rounded fins. But the major influence here seemed to be *The Wizard of Oz* film. The hawkmen were the winged monkeys all over again, just as aerodynamically unlikely (you can't tell me those little wings are going to get those big men up, much less keep them there), but impressive in their flocks from a distance. The same firm that contracted for the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West certainly built Ming's citadel, and the floating city of the hawkmen was the Emerald City that got bleached along with Flash's hair.

This movie did achieve one first, though. One of my gauges for fundamental, basic sensibility in a science fiction film has been the misuse of the word *intergalactic* for *interstellar* or even *interplanetary* (i.e., if it does, it isn't). In *Flash Gordon*, they managed to top that. There is a reference to "intergalactical upsets," which is my nomination for semantic horror of the year.

Aside from that, the movie has absolutely nothing noteworthy about it. The problem is, I think, that we now have a genre of film, the cinematic

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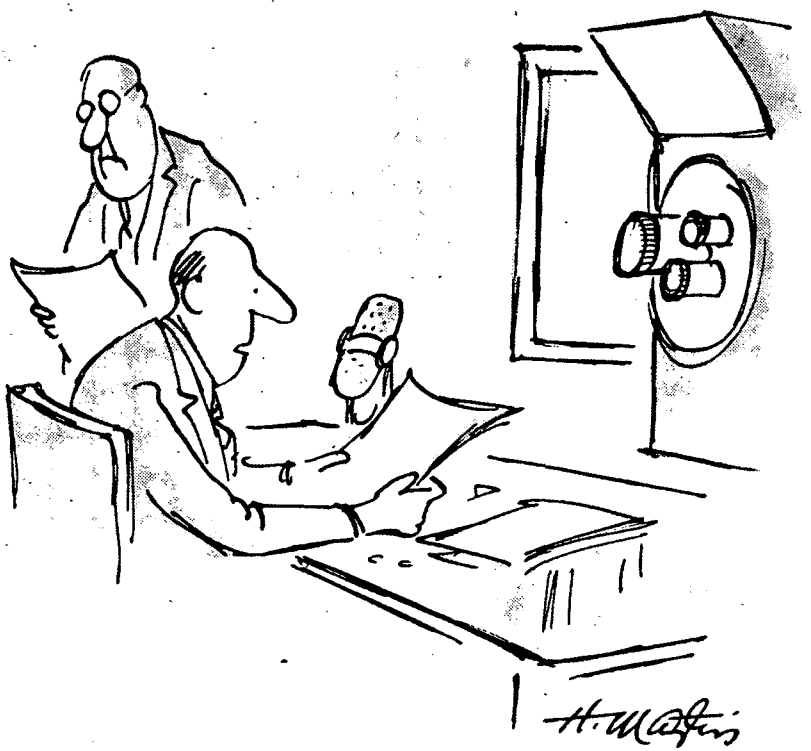
space opera, and the genre has jelled. *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* were certainly originals (as films, mind you, *not* literature), and while I know I'll get arguments on this, *Star Trek, the Motion Picture* and *Buck Rogers* had their share of freshness. Or maybe, even if they *weren't* all that original, we were still not used to seeing filmed science fiction done that big, that grand opera-ish.

But whether it has to do with how they're made, or how they're viewed, the grand space opera movie has had standards set and conventions established. Not just for the audience — us — who is, if not jaded, at least not awe struck at seeing real s/f on screen, but also for the imitators and exploiters who will grind them out, good, bad, and indifferent. But to be really special now, a film by a film-maker who is willing to venture beyond what is established and set is needed. *Flash Gordon* isn't it.



"Here is a bulletin just handed me — the National Weather Service advises everyone to proceed home, sit quietly and wait."

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The sad and bizarre story of a man who shared his wife with 2,000 other men, presented by Ron Goulart, whose latest novels are SKYROCKET STEELE (Pocket Books) and THE ROBOT IN THE CLOSET, coming in June from DAW.

Presenting Trilby Swain

BY

RON GOULART

He was laughing when they caught him.

Truly contented, covered with blood and machine oil, he came strolling along one of the arching pedramps over Boston Common. He was grinning and chuckling, the kilgun still swinging in his hand.

Even after they grabbed him, he kept laughing. It was the first time in over two years Doug Weinbower had been happy.

Doug had told me about what was making him unhappy when we lunched back in the winter of 2003. It was a bleak day, the Transcendental Meditation Cafeteria wasn't sufficiently heated and some of the incense ducts were overactive. Big snowflakes were splattering on the plexidome which protected the place. You could hear each splat because the TM was absolutely silent. Nobody's allowed to talk in there.

Doug was already at one of the low tables, seated cross-legged and frowning into his plate of vegetable curry.

I nodded, smiled and settled into a seated position on the chill flooring.

Doug was a tall, lanky man of thirty-three, dressed in a yellow one-piece daysuit with electric flash buttons. He didn't return my smile; instead he tugged a pen from a slash pocket near one of the flashing buttons. With it he scrawled something across the plyocloth table cover.

I twisted, craned my neck to read what he'd put there.

How would you feel if 2000 men were screwing your wife?

I shrugged, made a calming gesture. Patting the flap pockets of my all-weather funsuit, I located my electric pencil.

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Haven't been in Boston in 4 months, I wrote, hoping to change the subject. *So when Oldies, Ltd suggested this swing through Mass I was overj—*

Right this minute, Doug scribbled, *maybe 40 guys are in the sack with her!*

I glanced around the restaurant. The other dozen or so patrons were silently eating and meditating. Many with beatific smiles on their faces.

Sighing, I wrote, *You shouldn't believe Pinajian's figures. According to Fax Variety there are only 1846 Trilby Swain Lovebots in circ—*

1846 or 2000! What does it matter? His pentip dug deep into the plyocloth. *How would you feel if even only 1846 bastards were thrusting their misshapen members into your wife's—*

It isn't actually Trilby they're enjoying, I dashed off. *Doug, you've got to adjust better to the notion that—*

Um...excuse me.

Both Doug and I turned to gaze at the clean-cut young man who'd just come up to our table on his hands and knees.

I'm with Time-Life, he continued with his purple laundry marker. *How's it feel, Mr. Weinbower, to be cuckolded on an international scale? Does it—*

No comment! penned Doug.

There wasn't much tablecloth space left, so I leaned close to the reporter. "You better go away," I suggested in a whisper. "Or I'll punch you."

He ignored me. *Is it true, Weinbower, that your wife and Pinajian are closerthanthis and that they—*

"That's a god damn lie!" Doug jerked the plyocloth clean off our table, sending the plate of cooled curry zipping. He shrouded the persistent *Time-Life* man with the cloth and proceeded to sock him.

The reporter stumbled backward, tripped over one table and landed flat out on another, pretty much destroying the mood of the cafeteria.

"I thought this damn place would calm my jangled nerves." Standing, Doug grabbed me up by the arm. "Fat chance. Let's go where we can really talk."

From behind the food counter a large silver robot with a lopsided chef's hat was making angry *shush* motions at us.

All kinds of snow came swirling when we hit the pedramp outside.

"How's business with Oldies, Ltd.?" asked Doug as we started up a Boylston ramp.

"Well, this latest New England tour of the Astronauts Vaudeville Night is doing darn well. Of course not all the astronauts we've been able to sign up can dance as well as might be. Neil Armstrong, for examp—"

"Good, glad to hear it. Now, let me tell you about Trilby. That's Trilby Swain, my wife, who prefers to use her premarital name in her business."

Most of the story I already knew, but since it seemed to calm Doug to recount it all again, I concentrated on

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playing the sympathetic listener. The snow kept pelting us, and down below the ramps packs of Ethniks were holding one of their kilathons. Doug ignored all the distractions, the smack of the huge flakes, the crackle of the kilgun beams, the frenzied screams of agony.

Roughly two years ago, I remember the date because it was at the same time I went on my first nostalgia tour with the cast of the old 1980s TVWall hit, *Starship Commandos*, and experienced the first real grief I'd ever experienced with a traveling group of oldtimers—roughly two years ago Trilby had been approached by Orlando Pinajian. You know all about Pinajian, inventor of lovebots, multi-millionaire as a result. You may remember the time last summer when his picture was *on the covers of Time-Life, Mammon, Celeb, Fame, Now!* and *Who?*, all in the same sweltering week. After amassing an impressive fortune from the manufacture, sale and merchandising of his sexual-intercourse androids, Pinajian became almost fanatical over his roots and ancestry. He'd determined that back in the 1940s one of his ancestors had been a minor dignitary in the Mafia. This prompted Pinajian to deck himself out in pin-stripe suits, snap-brim hats, black cigars and other period props. He had, at a rumored cost of over $72,000,000, built a 1940s-style motel on his vast estate on part of what used to be Harvard before those experimental viruses got loose back in 1987. He called the place the Beantown Motor Lodge and did all his business from there.

Two years back, though his Pushbutton ratings were plummeting, Doug was still on the PBS-Exxon Network as Uncle Windy. That was the show where he explained sex to the 4 to 6 year old viewer with the aid of puppets shaped like various sex organs and related parts. It was at the annual Howdy Awards Banquet, where Doug was up for but didn't win an award in the Medical Dummies & Puppets Division, that Pinajian first spotted Trilby.

You must know how stunning she is. Probably you recall a few months back, before the tragedy, when Trilby, her red hair flashing like a blazing sewdowood fire, her provocative silver-tinted lips puckering on the brink of forming a passionate kiss, showed up on the covers of *Time-Life, Mammon, Celeb, Fame, Now!* and *Gentleman Farmer*, all in the same week. That was the same week, in fact, that CBS' 24 Hour News devoted a full seventeen minutes to her. Well, suffice it to say Pinajian was stunned, smitten, overwhelmed. He adjusted his tie with the hand-painted flying geese on it, burnished all his diamond finger rings on his silk display handkerchief, and strutted over to the table Doug and Trilby were sharing with Mr. Doorbell, the Readin' Robot and Zippo the Hippo. Doug was in the midst of arguing with Zippo that it was dumb to come

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to a high-class banquet in costume, and thus he didn't immediately notice Pinajian hovering over his lovely wife and giving off swirls of smoke.

But Trilby noticed. Pinajian was, under all that nostalgic flash, a handsome, big-chested, wide-shouldered man of forty-one. His hair, glimpsed on the rare occasions when he removed his pearl-grey topper, was curly and glossy. His smile was warm and open.

"Hiya, toots!" he said in his deep voice. "Youse are sure some dish, an' 'at's no baloney. A tomato like youse I could make a pile of moolah with."

Pinajian's research people, I might mention, were nowhere near as thorough as ours at Oldies, Ltd, and so his gangster vocabulary was always an unconvincing amalgam of the slang of various decades mixed with a good deal of fictional jargon.

"Beg pardon?" said Trilby in her delicately husky voice, turning her glittering emerald eyes on the android tycoon.

"Geeze, what a knockout! A real peacherino," exclaimed the delighted Pinajian. "Sugar, half de bozos in dis cockeyed world would love to boff youse. An' I'm just de guy who can cinch da deal."

Doug became aware of the man now. Sucking in a great breath of smoky air, he stood up, saying nothing, and threw a punch.

Pinajian dodged easily, chuckled, produced a showy business card from a pin-striped pocket. "The deal, an' dis is special for youse, gorgeous, is 200,000 clams up front and a fat 15 percent of every sale," he explained, ducking another wild punch from Doug. "You stand to make big bucks on dis, kiddo. So think it over." He smiled, avoided yet another of Doug's socks and sauntered back to the table he was sharing with three incredibly lovely Chinese puppeteers.

Well, Doug tore up the business card, yelled quite a bit, told his wife that nobody was going to make an android simulacra of her and sell copies to a bunch of sexually stunted upper-class nitwits who had nothing better to do with their ill-gotten dough than buy a silly damn robot to stick their private parts into. Or vice versa, since Pinajian also offered a line of male lovebots.

Then, however, his Uncle Windy show got canceled. Not only canceled but outlawed from the airwaves forever. The Kilall Abortionists Lobby had conceived the notion that Doug, or at least his puppets, favored abortion. They proved powerful enough, taken together with his lately unimpressive ratings, to get him clean off the air and blacklisted to boot.

The first few weeks Doug didn't panic at all. He worked up a new batch of puppets, mostly seeds and vegetables, and put together an impressive proposal for a show to inform 6 to 8 year olds about the wonders of agriculture. Nobody would so much as listen

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to him. And up at ABC-Iranian they did him mild physical harm when they tossed him out into a plaz corridor, also breaking his scarecrow and two of his ear-of-corn puppets.

Trilby decided to take action. Without telling her husband, she contacted Pinajian, fended off his advances, whacked his fingers when he attempted to slide them along one of her beautiful thighs, and signed up to let Lovebot Industries make a detailed and completely realistic android replica of her.

The Trilby Swain sex andy turned out to be one of the season's big successes, which you may have read about in the *NY News-Times* or *Forbes-Fortune*. Less than three days after the first Trilby Swain lovebot arrived in the Manhattan showrooms they had 337 orders for dupes. Within a month 1000 had been sold. Trilby's share on that, after Pinajian had deducted the cost of advertising, packaging and pixphone calls, came to just over $7,000,000. She, with a feeling of great satisfaction, paid off every debt she and Doug owed, even bought off the bounty hunters Sears and Macy's had put on Doug's trail. She honestly looked forward to a new and happier life, debt and problem free.

From what Doug told me later, Trilby didn't confide in him until the first Trilby Swain was enroute from Cambridge to Manhattan. All those sessions at the Lovebot facilities, while they made molds of every inch of her lovely body and duplicated her speech and thought patterns, she lied about. She'd convinced Doug she'd actually been consulting the noted vegetarian psychiatrist, Dr. Niwatori Kanzoo, over in the Hartford Enclave. Dr. Kanzoo's first book had been on the *NY News-Times* bestseller list for three days. It was entitled *Meat Make You Much Goofy* and had seemingly helped millions to new sanity.

Doug had never suspected Trilby, especially since she saw to it she always came home from her Lovebot sessions reeking of carrots, lentils and herb teas. He never told me exactly how he reacted when she finally told him the truth. I do know, though, he ordered a good deal of new furniture shortly thereafter and had one whole plazwall section of his domehouse livingpod replaced.

Trilby was overjoyed with the money she was bringing in. It was the first time since they'd signed their long-term marriage contract in 1999 that she'd contributed substantially to the family finances. It didn't, initally anyway, much bother her that men all across America, and eventually in every civilized and semi-civilized nation of the world, were doing intimate and often weird and excessive sexual things to exact replicas of her own admirable body.

But it affected Doug. When I lunched with him that day in the TM joint, he was already in a highly agitated state. My advice to him to try to get used to

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the situation didn't calm him at all. I even suggested he see someone like Dr. Kanzoo, whose new book *No Eat Pork Chop Or You Be Most Sorry* had just appeared to excellent reviews. This drew only an angry snort from Doug and he went stomping away from me on the alternate pedramp.

I know, I should have checked back with him the next day, tried to mend the rift. But instead I went on a rush nostalgia tour of most of the pop arts colleges in the Warmzone with the surviving cast members of *Starship Commandos*, forgetting about Doug for the moment. The tour, as I'd anticipated and told my wife, was a perpetual nightmare. The actor who'd played Captain Hammeroid in the popular 1980s show had added brain-box stimulation to his list of vices since the earlier tour, and half the time we couldn't get his head out of the damned gadget and into his space helmet for a night's performance. On top of which, the actor who used to be Dr. Tojo wouldn't wear his pointy ears any longer, since he felt they demeaned him, and the guy who'd portrayed Butch the Robot decided to hold a press conference on our third tour stop and announce he'd always been a trisexual and was now openly admitting it. The whole tour was, as I say, a nightmare.

When I finally saw Doug Weinbower again, two months had passed. I was in Boston again, trying to unearth an old gentleman named Phelps who'd staged comic-book fan conventions way back in the 1970s because our Oldies, Ltd. research indicated comic books were ready for another wave of nostalgic acceptance. My quest had taken me down into the Renewed Skid Row Sector, and it was there under the ramps as I cautiously searched through saloons and stim parlors that I saw Doug come tottering out of a place called the Last Refuge.

"Doug!" I called, shocked some.

He blinked as a bit of sunlight which had worked its way down between the ramps and the sooty air touched his haggard face. He looked terrible, almost as ruined as some of the old actors I dealt with. "Why, hello," he said, managing to pull himself into a nearly upright position. "What brings you back to Boston?"

When he held out his wobbly hand to shake mine, I noticed one of his sexual puppets dangling from it. "What in the name of heaven are you doing down here, Doug?"

"Oh, I do a show for the Last Refuge crowd now and then." He stuffed the tacky penis puppet into a pocket of his dirt-smeared allseason greatcoat. "Keeps me in practice until something better comes along."

I put a hand on his frayed shoulder. "But Trilby's earning millions."

He started crying, suddenly and violently. "Lord, I can't touch her money. She's unfaithful to me." Sobs racked him and he wiped at his sunken

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eyes with a testicle puppet he tugged out of another shabby pocket.

"Damn it, we've been all over this before," I told him, angry. "Guys are only sleeping with *replicas* of your wife, Doug. Machines. You and only you have the real Trilby. Listen, in this book I've been reading by Dr. Kanzoo he says, 'No get upset over what other people do, other people no you.' To me the good sense of that is—"

"She's sleeping with Pinajian!"

"Impossible. Trilby is a woman of terrific taste and sensibility. She wouldn't fool around with that anachronistic hood."

"Let's step into the Forlorn Hope over there and share a couple of plazpax of muscatel," he suggested, pointing with a quavery hand.

I glanced through the sooty murk and made out a jagged hole in a real brick wall. Scrawled over the gap were the letters FOROLR HPE. "Is that what that's supposed to say, Forlorn Hope? Doesn't read well and the guy who lettered it can't spell for—"

"C'mon, for Christ sake, I need to talk to you." He caught hold of my arm. "Don't make me beat you up or worse. We're friends and I don't like to mangle friends."

"We can talk, sure, Doug. Except why not a different spot?" I aimed a thumb skyward. "Up on a different level."

"I like it around here, it's real." His grip tightened.

I've had a good deal of experience dealing with difficult people. I sensed it would be wisest to go along with Doug into the Forlorn Hope and listen to him right there.

The idea that any hour of the day or night some guy somewhere was having his way with a completely accurate replica of his wife hadn't been hurting Doug as much lately as it had during those early weeks of Trilby's celebrity. What was gnawing at him now was the growing conviction the real Trilby, *his* Trilby, and been unfaithful. And with none other than Orlando Pinajian.

The idea had really taken hold of him about three weeks before I encountered him in the lower depths of Boston.

Because of her increasing fame, Trilby received an incredible number of invitations to lecture and make public appearances. Every group from the Trilby Swain Collectors of North America to the Hopeless Veterans of the Brazil Wars begged her to show up, talk to them and smile her dazzling smile at them. At first, even against Doug's increasingly violent protests, she did attend a good many of the conventions, lunches, dinners. Her notion being the more publicity she got, the more lovebots would be sold. And even if the Trilby Swain andies stopped selling, as she suspected they someday would, her popularity might lead to other things. Doug might stay blacklisted forever; somebody would

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have to go on earning money for them. Even when he pointed out the damn things had earned her $16,000,000, most of which was invested in gold, silver, diamonds, real estate and nostalgia items, she persisted. Though of late she'd been pruning the number of public appearances.

On the particular evening which set him off, Doug had used the skycar, the brand new crimson one, to fly into Manhattan to audition for the part of the off-screen voice of a toilet bowl in a Kilratz commercial being prepared to air on the Hispanic Ghetto Network. They allowed him to read half a page of script before telling him his voice was too cultured. Even when he attempted a second reading, holding his nose and dropping his G's, it did no good. Doug was certain it was the blacklist and not his talents that had lost him the job. As he zoomed toward the Hartford Enclave to pick up Trilby after one of her now rarer public appearances, he was fuming.

He went whizzing through the twilight, muttering, "I'm good, I know it. I'm one of the great voice-men in this whole stupid country. Hell, how many actors can do a believable prick voice or a balls voice or, especially, a pussy? Yeah, and do it in such good taste as to inspire not one damn letter of protest or crazed pixcall from a parent of a 4 to 6 year old. Jesus, why did Pinajian come into our lives?"

Pinajian had, as I kept pointing out to Doug, nothing to do really with the Uncle Windy cancellation. Kids, especially those fickle 4 to 6 ones, he had to aim at, are notoriously disloyal. Day after day, via Pushbutton, they'll vote for you and then suddenly forget you and start slapping someone else's button. That's the way show business is.

Doug missed the roofpad of the Psychotic War Veterans Hospital entirely and almost sacked the skycar, the one Trilby'd insisted on buying for him and which he loathed, into the side of the Quarrelsome Older Persons Home which towered across the way. Getting control of himself and the skycar, he managed a landing on his third pass.

Trilby, looking incredibly beautiful in a synfur frontless pantsuit, had finished her lecture and was out on the landing area circled by half a dozen Psychotic Vets when Doug hopped out of the flying car and came hurrying toward her.

"Okay, let's get going," he said.

"Say there, you're one heck of a lucky guy, Mr. Swain," remarked one of the PVs.

"My name is Weinbower," he corrected. "Trilby chose to use her maiden name for her career."

"*Maiden* name, that's a laugh," laughed a black PV.

"Who asked you, jigaboo?" demanded Doug.

The Negro narrowed his eyes. "Is that intended as a racial slur? I grew up in a middle-status predominantly

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white enclave near Taos, and thus the usual ethnic—"

"Oh, stuff it." Doug caught at his wife's lovely arm and tugged. "Let's go home."

Trilby smiled at the fringe of puzzled veterans. "My husband is noted for his crusty exterior and inner warmth," she assured them as he dragged her toward the skycar. "So don't let his good-natured kidding rattle any of you, fellas."

"Horse crap," said Doug, nearly tossing her up into the passenger bucket.

Trilby fastened herself to the seat. "Didn't get the job, huh?"

"You can stuff it, too, with your easy answers to why I do what I do." He started the machine so violently that it went lurching and bouncing across the pad, missing parked skycars and leaping up into the darkening night with a wobbling woosh.

"Really doesn't matter, you know, Doug. We have more than enough money to tide us—"

"Pinajian money."

They flew homeward in silence for several long moments.

They were nearly home when Doug commenced sniffing at the cabin air. "The smell."

"Don't notice anything."

"New plastic smell."

"Well, this is a new skycar almost."

"Naw, not a new car smell," he persisted. "The distinct and unmistakable scent of a new android. No matter how much Pinajian's nitwit staff sprays 'em with body smells, musk and cheap perfume, lovebots always smell faintly of new plaz for a few weeks. You didn't know, since I never told you, but I've dropped in at several of his damn showrooms. Been there to see all those idiot customers ogling you and the other sims."

"That indicates you're better able to accept the fact of my celebrity and—"

"You're not Trilby," he told her evenly. "I know my wife, and her you ain't. You look like her, talk like her, think like her and still you are not Trilby."

She pressed her warm fingertips to his cheek. "Doug, you really are acting—"

"If I dropped you from this height, we'd prove it quick. You'd make a nice nutzenbolts smash when you hit the ground. I may just try that test."

Trilby ran her gorgeous tongue over her silvered lips, touched a hand to one of her small but stimulating breasts. "Okay, let's not have any violence." She leaned, slowly, back. "She told me to admit the fact in an emergency, which this looks to be."

"Why'd she do this? What in the hell—"

"Trilby simply isn't feeling too well, Doug. You ought to be more considerate of her," said the near-perfect imitation of his wife.

"You still haven't explained *you!*"

"She can't face these darn crowds

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anymore. So Pinajian provided her with—"

"Sure, Pinajian. That figures."

"She intended to tell you, except the way you've been act—"

"Instead she allows me to make an asshole of myself, lets me pick you up in front of a bunch of goofys and act like you're a real human—"

"Trilby had second thoughts and tried to pixphone you. They told her you'd already gone storming out."

"What was she going to tell me? 'Doug, darling, I'm sending you a robot to take my place. Every other guy in the world likes 'em, you ought—'"

"House," mentioned the android. "You just flew over it."

Doug acknowledged that information with a snort. He kept flying away from his roofpad for another five minutes before giving the skycar an angry change of direction.

Trilby, the real and authentic Trilby, radiating concern and vulnerability, came running over to him soon as he landed. "Sorry I couldn't warn you. I've been feeling sort of dreadful all day and—"

"Warn me about what?" He walked closer, pretended to study her face carefully. "Well, doggone, that wasn't you I picked up from the goofy bin. Could have fooled me."

She followed him as he stalked into the living pod. "I know you must have realized," she said. "You've got, though, to understand what all of this nonsense means. I did it for us, you know. And the pressures lately have—"

"Smell something." He was circling the room, bending to sniff at the folding chairs and the synsilk drapes. "Yep, cigar smoke. Not sewdobacco or soybaccy, no, real authentic bootleg tobacco. The very stuff Pinajian uses for his 1940s stogies." Whirling, he jabbed an accusing finger in his wife's direction. "You've been unfaithful to me, literally this time. Sure, you sent that dummy in your place, used her to decoy me as well. Spent the afternoon in the sleephole with that oily entrepreneur. Does he take off his silly 1940s hat when he commits his—"

"Doug, listen, Orlando was here. But for no more than ten minutes this afternoon," Trilby swore. "He delivered that sim you just brought home. Really, I have never slept with another man since we signed our marriage agreement. That was one of the clauses and, even though it's a bit old-fashioned, I've always abided."

"Until today," he said, voice loud. "And how do you get by claiming you've been loyal. Hell, you've been screwed by guys from coast to coast, by swarthy foreigners in every clime and—"

"That's the dolls, not me." She approached, hand held out. "Me, I've never betrayed you."

He let her touch his cheek. "You're right, I was...mixed up there for a minute."

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She shook her head. "Don't worry, Doug, I know things are going to start getting better."

Things got worse.

Though I never actually saw Doug again, I've been able to piece together a pretty fair account of what led up to the night they found him wandering across the Common with the kilgun.

He couldn't shake the notion that his wife was having an affair with Pinajian. He also started to have trouble accepting his Trilby as the real one. He took to making all sorts of, elaborate in some cases, tests of her reality and authenticity.

Maybe with help Doug might have worked out his problems.

If it hadn't been for the Kilall Abortionists people, there would perhaps have been a chance. After they got Doug tossed off the air, blacklisted and checked off as a danger, they went after others. One of their new targets was Pinajian. I'm almost certain, as certain as I can get without putting myself in an uncomfortable position, that it was the Kilall forces who began the letter compaign.

The first anonymous mailfax Doug got said: "Where is she every afternoon? While you struggle to find gainful employment, your lusty wife is with Pinajian. See for yourself!"

Doug didn't ask Trilby where she had been going afternoons. He didn't even do the sensible thing and follow her. Instead he pretended to be going out to new auditions.

What he really did was hop in the skycar to zoom out to the vicinity of the Beantown Motel. After a few afternoons of lurking around the perimeter of the place, he was able to bribe one of the guards. After that, he'd ditch his skycar and sneak right onto the grounds. The motel was truly ugly, the designer had succeeded in capturing the exact look, feel and smell of a tacky 1940s motel. There were rows of low peach-colored cottages with green shingle roofs. The name Beantown, along with a squiggly neon depiction of a pot of beans boiling over, flashed incessantly above the grey gravel parking lot and the kidney-shape pool with the plaz dead leaves floating on its scummy surface.

The first afternoon he got near enough to Pinajian's suite, he saw Trilby there. It made him go ice-cold. She was naked, they both were, and Pinajian didn't take off the hat, seated on the edge of a saggy bed with its peach-color spread half turned down. Doug watched through a smeared bedroom window while Pinajian fondled Trilby.

Doug did make one attempt that evening when he got home to bring up the matter with his wife.

It was over dinner, right after he'd convinced himself she was real. "I've been hearing some rumors," he said, eyes on the carrot and lentil stew on his plate.

"About work for you?"

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"No, about you."

"Me?"

"Somebody told me they saw you with Pinajian."

Trilby shook her head. "Don't start that again," she suggested quietly. "I haven't seen the man since the night he dumped me off the lovebot here."

"Somebody told me they saw you with him with afternoon at his motel."

"They couldn't have because I was...."

"You were where?"

"Somewhere else, not with Orlando."

"Somebody says they're certain they saw you right in his suite," continued Doug. "You and Pinajian together in Beantown this afternoon."

"It wasn't me," she said. "But I wouldn't put it past him to keep an android simulacra of me around."

"Somebody said it was *you*."

He kept watching them, growing angrier and angrier. Doug would crouch at that dingy window and watch Pinajian make love to his wife every afternoon.

Doug decided to kill Pinajian.

No, the both of them.

On a rainy afternoon he showed up at the motel with a battered but functional kilgun he'd acquired at the Forlorn Hope. He had it tucked under his shabby allseason greatcoat. The neon beanpot was making odd sputtering sounds through the rain.

There they were, naked, arms around each other.

With an ungloved fist he smashed in the window glass, real glass not a plaz imitation, and climbed in.

"What are you doin' here, you dumb bozo?" Pinajian sat up.

"You and my wife." He tugged out the kilgun.

"I can explain the whole darn thing if youse—"

Doug fired, first at Pinajian.

The blasts from the pistol sliced through the big man's flesh, making fierce hollow channels clear through him. Blood and body fluids and innards started spewing out.

Trilby screamed and screamed, but Doug shot her anyway.

But she didn't bleed. Oil came out instead, and little bits of metal and plaz and spills of incredibly thin wire.

He stood there, with Pinajian's dead body sprawled at his feet and the ruined android toppled against him and splashing him with oil.

"It isn't Trilby. It's an android."

That was true. Trilby had been seeing Dr. Kanzoo those afternoons, mostly because she was so upset about what had been happening to her and Doug. She'd been afraid to tell him where she was really going.

Doug, the kilgun still clutched tight in his fist, moved a pace back and the lovebot fell to the floor.

"She's faithful," he said. "She wasn't here. She's been absolutely faithful."

He started to laugh. And he never stopped.

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Lisa Tuttle's new story is an interesting change of pace for her, a science fiction tale about a romance on one of the Lost Planets, where the words love and marriage had a profoundly different meaning.

The Bone Flute

BY

LISA TUTTLE

I am forever falling in love with beautiful men who break my heart. Perhaps I prefer it that way. There are worse things than being left.

I first saw Venn in a spaceport bar. Not my usual sort of hangout, but I was a stranger to that world, with nowhere immediate to go and no one to see, and I was tired and looking for someplace dark and quiet.

The bar was called The White Bird, and it was dark and quiet enough at that hour. Light was provided by a set of glowing, artificial birds that fluttered around, seemingly at random, lighting up different areas as they briefly roosted. The female dancers — off-duty now, and lounging at a table — continued the bird imagery with costumes of feathers constructed to continually fall away and reassemble in various more or less revealing ways. Besides myself and the dancers, there was only one other person in the bar — a dark-haired, very handsome young man who was sitting with the dancers.

They were laughing, the three costumed women and the man, and although I could not hear what they said, I guessed that the young man was being teased about something.

He rose from the table just as a bird was passing overhead, and his face was suddenly lit. I felt his beauty like a pain in my stomach. At that moment, with his beard and the classic lines of his face, he might have been an ancient god revealed to a hidden observer. He was still laughing and directing his attention to the group he was with; he was unaware of my presence.

He gestured at one of the women, and the other two began to clap their hands and hoot. The one he had indicated reached with one hand behind her head and was suddenly naked.

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"Now take off your clothes," she said, her voice carrying clearly.

He hesitated and glanced around the bar. His gaze passed over me, and he turned back and pulled off his one-piece, self-consciousness evident only in the slight trembling of his legs and the clumsiness with which he tossed the discarded suit over a chair. He turned his back to the naked woman and bent his head, and she fastened something small in his curly black hair.

Feathers sprouted on his shoulders, down the sides of his legs, around his waist: white feathers tipped with gold. They outlined his nipples, concealed his genitals, and popped up like stray snowflakes in the hair on top of his head.

He looked down at himself and laughed out loud; then he began to strut and show himself off as his three companions applauded.

The naked woman settled herself in a chair, and one of the others jumped up and ran around to the back of the bar. The wide bar-top now lit up like a runway, and I realized that it was a stage. The gentle background music now swelled to fill the room and took on a heavy, insistent beat.

"Show us what you can do," said the woman who had given him her costume. "Go on, show us your stuff." Her voice was a good imitation of the loud, drunken belligerence she must often have heard directed at herself, and she sat as if her nakedness was a uniform of high rank.

The other two women drew chairs closer to the bar. "Go on," they said. "Get up there." They laughed and touched each other with conspiratorial glee.

If he was nervous, he didn't show it. He wore a pleased half-smile on his face. The feathers seemed to glow against his dark skin and black hair. An odd sight, but I thought I had never seen anyone more desirable.

Suddenly he ran forward and launched himself onto the bar. He was awkward mounting the stage, but quickly scrambled to his feet. Then he stood very still, then raised his right arm and beckoned with one finger. In response, one of the birds flew to him and perched on the uplifted finger. He held it beneath his face, and the upcast lighting made his face appear demonic. The feathers in his hair might have been horns; the feathers which shifted on his body might have concealed anything.

"Ladies," he said in a deep voice. "For your pleasure, the exotic dancing and erotic talents of — *Venn!*"

On the last word he flung out his hand, launching the bird, and began to dance.

I was in no state to be very critical, but it seemed to me that Venn was a natural dancer. He'd clearly had no training, but he was utterly uninhibited, easy in his body, and quickly caught the feel of the music. His seductive gestures were not subtle, but they were effective. As I watched him

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dance, I grew more aroused, and it was clear, from the glimpses offered by the shifting, falling feathers, that his movements were arousing to himself, too.

When he had done, I burst into enthusiastic applause, even before his friends did. Startled, he looked my way, and seemed to see me then for the first time. When he climbed down from the stage, it was to me he came first, and not the dancers who were calling his name and commenting on his ability.

He stood close to my chair, looking down at me. He was breathing hard, and I could see the perspiration shining on his face, and smell the faint musk of his body. "May I buy you a drink?" he asked.

I felt my heart lift with anticipation. "The offer should come from me," I said. "As a token of my appreciation. I enjoyed your performance very much."

He smiled with his eyes. "We'll buy each other a drink. But let me change, first — offstage, these feathers seem a bit silly."

I watched him walk back to the dancers, and they were watching me. The naked one smiled. I nodded gravely in response, and she shrugged and turned away.

Venn came back dressed in his one-piece, but it was open to the naval now, and he was still barefoot. He fell into a chair at my table.

"Hard work?" I asked.

"Exhausting. But, then, things worth doing often are. Pleasantly so." He looked me up and down, taking his time. "You're ... in trade?"

"How could you tell?"

"You're not a regular, and this place doesn't draw many women. So it seems likely you just wandered in to kill a few hours. We're in a spaceport, you're not in uniform, you're alone...." He shrugged. "There are a dozen other things you could be, but trader seemed a safe bet and not a guess that would insult you if I were wrong."

"And you," I said. "Not a professional dancer ... the bartender?"

He grimaced. "I wish you hadn't," he said, sounding pained.

I laughed. "Your heart's not in it," I said. "It's only until something better comes along. Your real interest is in ... art?"

"Music," he said. "I'm a composer, and I also perform, when I can get an audience." He sounded livelier now, talking about himself. "Actually, I'm not really the bartender. I came to apply for the job — they like the human touch at peak hours, despite the automated bar — but the owner didn't show up. That was how I came to be talking with the others."

"Maybe you should apply for a job as a dancer," I said.

"I wouldn't mind," he said. "If you were here to watch me." He gave me a look that made me feel like melted butter.

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"Tell me about yourself," he said, so I did, giving him the interesting version, which relied heavily on listing all the worlds I had been to and suggesting adventures, but which revealed very little of myself.

As he listened to me, Venn was constantly assessing me. Before he spoke, he gauged my likely response. It was a diplomat's skill, or a sychophant's, and I was aware of it. But it didn't matter. I was flattered that he took the trouble, that he cared enough to try to impress me. And when he told me about his music and his dreams of success, I was as interested and approving as he could have wished. If he was playing me, I was playing him as well. I wanted him, and I had made up my mind to have him.

"How long are you staying?" he asked me.

"Tomorrow I leave for Habille," I said.

That interested him, as I knew it would. Mention any of the Lost Planets and there will be a surge of interest in any listener.

"Habille," he said, lingering over the name. "I'd love to see Habille. A teacher of mine went there once to study their music. I would love to hear it — it would be fascinating to know what paths their music took over the centuries they were cut off from the Network."

"There's quite a demand for all kinds of art from the Lost Planets," I said. "People imagine there will be some special magic, some freshness that the rest of us have lost." I shrugged. "I've never been to Habille, but the other Lost Planets are mostly backwater kinds of places. They have their oddities, but most of the real differences don't hit you in the face right away. It takes time and patience to discover them — and they may not be worth discovering. On the surface, things have already changed. They're all part of the Network again. Only underneath they may be different still. Their legacy from the past is that they believe different things and do things differently, even though they follow the fashion in clothes and gadgets and entertainments."

"But there are differences," he persisted. "The Dead Speakers of Far Weiss—"

I tried not to grimace, not wanting to offend him if he believed. "A very profitable difference for Far Weiss," I said. "I was thinking of something less ... definite. Something more general, which would show up throughout the culture. On Habille, for example, I've heard that the people mate for life. Infidelity is unthought of. When they fall in love, it is forever — nothing less is possible for them."

He searched my face; his dark eyes softened slightly. "That appeals to you?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "When you get there, you'll probably discover it only means there's a feudal atmosphere towards

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marriage, with fierce punishments for anyone who steps out of line."

I shook my head. "That isn't how I heard it. It's supposed to be ... innate. Utterly natural. They fall in love once and for all. They don't need to legislate it anymore than they need to pass a law requiring all citizens to breathe."

He leaned closer to me. His eyes were intent and serious, although he was smiling. " What makes the people of Habille so different from us? How do they succeed where the rest of humanity merely dreams and believes and inevitably fails?"

I wanted to touch him. I was weary of words. I managed a few more. "Perhaps it's a matter of belief," I said. "They grow up believing in love in a way we don't. We expect to fail, although we may hope not to, while they don't believe they *can* fail. They fall in love once, and their belief sustains it, makes it imperative. They can't imagine anything else — and what can't be imagined is impossible."

Later, after more drinks and dinner, I asked Venn to spend the night with me. I knew, as I asked, that he knew I asked more than that, and I knew, when he accepted, that he meant to stay with me.

I will always remember our trip to Habille: that isolated, perfect time when the two of us were a world unto ourselves. The ship made its own mysterious, stately progress through silent space, and we need concern ourselves with nothing but each other. We made love, we slept, we ate, we played like two young animals snug in a safe den. No one intruded: the outside world did not exist. Sometimes Venn sang me songs of his own composition, and I applauded. They seemed, to my love-besotted mind, the highest perfection of music.

Venn told me stories about his past — mostly stories about the many women who had loved him. He was not trying to make me jealous, but simply letting me know that he was valuable. He was not successful, as I was; he drifted along from job to job, dreaming of the day his music would be discovered and make him rich and famous, but still he was important. People sought him out; people wanted him. He would give himself to me, but only as long I appreciated the gift. Only so long as I made him feel valuable.

The magic ended when we arrived on Habille.

There, of necessity, I had to turn my thoughts to business. I had much less time and attention for Venn, and he was not pleased with his change in status. He became sulky and demanding. Yet when I tried to include him by asking his advice about the advisability of buying this work of art, importing that set of tapestries or metal flatware, he glowered at me and accused me of keeping him from his own work. Having had the whole, he would not be content with part of my attention.

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Habille, too, must have been a sad disappointment to Venn. Despite my warnings, he expected something alien, some exotic and beautiful mystery.

But Habille was uninspiring: an unimpressive, industrial world which had quickly picked up all the modern conveniences from the Network, but none of the fads or fashions which made life more interesting. They had no interest in other worlds on Habille — they had their world and their ways, and that was all they knew or wanted to know. Another planet might have provided architectural marvels and bizarre rituals for the tourists, but Habille kept its cultural differences quietly tucked out of sight. That there was a great deal of strangeness beneath the surface, I had no doubt. What it might be, I did not know.

Most of the population lived in the huge, ugly cities. The agricultural areas which covered most of the Southern region and filled much of one ocean were controlled by machines from a distance. I admit my own heart sank at the sight of the first of those unaesthetic cities — what could I possibly find to buy in such a place? The alternative to the cities were small, barren-looking villages, composed entirely of pale brown, dome-shaped houses built of rock. They seemed to have erupted from the flat ground; to be a natural part of the monochromatic, dusty landscape, rather than structures built by people who might have chosen to make them beautiful. The villages were totally dependent upon the cities, and those who lived there were for the most part artisans and artists, people who could sell their creations to the cities in order to support their lives outside.

I didn't see the attraction of the ugly little villages until I had spent several days in one of the largest cities. After that, I decided that the villages possessed a certain quiet charm. They were undemanding, they were uncrowded, they lacked the pressures and the people, and above all the noise, of the cities.

I decided, therefore, to rent a house in one of the villages as my base, and travel in a rented ground-car around to the other villages and cities to seek out the things I wanted to buy. Venn approved of this idea. He couldn't work in the city, he claimed — he couldn't concentrate in such a sterile environment, and the music that he'd heard there was all pap and mush, all recycled from the Network. Perhaps, in one of the villages, he might find the *real* music of Habille, he said, along with the quiet and inspiration to work on his own.

His wish was quickly granted.

As we drove into the dusty center of the village, we could hear faint, high, wavering musical notes above the sound of the car. I parked the car and shut it off. In the silence, the music was clearer. The sound made the hair prickle on the back of my neck, and I felt suddenly near tears.

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I reached out to take Venn's hand, but he wasn't looking at me, hadn't noticed, was already out of the car and moving away, following the sounds. I blinked my eyes hard and followed him.

Just around the corner, his back against the side of one of the yellow-brown, beehive-shaped houses, was a pale-skinned man playing some sort of flute. His eyes were closed, and he was oblivious to his surroundings. Others stood in the street or paused in doorways, drawn by the music as we were.

My skin prickled and crawled and I felt obscurely frightened as the music went on.

Then it stopped.

The young man drew the instrument away from his lips and opened his eyes.

There was silence, and then Venn began to applaud. Almost immediately the other listeners, too, applauded, and the soft slapping sound hung in the dusty air. An odd response to such music, I thought, and wondered if the natives would have clapped if Venn had not. But, not wishing to seem rude, I applauded too.

The musician looked around, yet hardly seemed to see us, as if he had just wakened.

Venn stepped forward. "That was magnificent," he said. "I've never heard anything like it. What is that instrument you play?"

"I'm glad it pleases you," the musician said slowly. He held his flute in his hand and stared at it. "The credit belongs to this my flute, Alean."

The flute was white and oddly primitive looking. It seemed to have been carved from a piece of bone.

Venn put out his hand to touch it, and the musician at once drew it protectively against his chest.

"Forgive me," Venn said.

The man nodded and turned and began to walk away.

"Wait," said Venn. "I'd like to hear you play again."

"You will," said the musician with a brief, backward glance, and then he had rounded the corner and was out of sight.

Venn raised his eyebrows at me. I could see he was excited, truly interested in something for the first time since we had arrived on this world. My own spirits lifted a little at that, grasping at the hope that the rift between us might be mended.

But his attention had turned now to one of the inhabitants of the village, a young woman standing in a doorway. She remained, although most of the other listeners had moved away when the music ended. She was watching us curiously. She was very pretty, with a creamy oval face, large dark eyes, and a slender figure.

"Do you know when or where he's likely to play again?" Venn asked her.

"He wanders and plays as the spirit takes him," she said. "He'll likely stay here for another week at least. You are strangers here?"

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We admitted that and introduced ourselves. Her name was Wara Duleen, and she said she was a music student.

"I'm a composer myself," said Venn. "What did you think of the man who just played for us?"

"Reni Laer is one of the great ones," she said simply.

"That was an odd flute he played."

"That was his wife." She smiled. "It sounds strange to you ... but you saw that it was made of bone? That bone came from his wife, Alean. She died two years ago — it's the sorrow of his life. He might have killed himself, to follow her, but decided to live with his grief. To keep her with him always, he had the flute made. Before her death he was a promising composer and a good musician, but now — now he is great. It means nothing to him. He could not have composed that song you heard today had he not lived through such great sorrow, nor without his wife's love, still with him after death, just as she is still with him, in the flute and the music."

"That's beautiful," Venn said softly. "To love so deeply ...." He was gazing at her intently, oblivious to me. I had to stop myself from making a possessive gesture towards him, aware that he would probably shake me off. I saw her looking back at him, and saw the creamy skin of her cheeks redden. I felt the immanence of betrayal like a blow to my stomach.

"I'd like to hear some of your music some time," Venn said. "I can offer you some of my own songs in exchange."

"That would be nice," she said, looking away. She drew back slightly, into the shelter of her house.

"Venn," I said. "We must be going. We left the car...."

"I'll see you later," he said to Wara Duleen.

The house we had rented was a yellow-stone beehive like all the others, and I was grateful for the blue tile numbers set above the rounded doorway to distinguish it. Inside, it was simple but seemed fairly comfortable: it was just four square rooms, stacked like boxes on two levels. The walls were smooth and white, and the furnishings were all of bright primary colors. Thick woven rugs of blue and red covered the rock floor. Lighting came from recesses near the ceiling: the tiny round windows let in hardly any light or air.

"I like it," said Venn. "This is the real Habille — simple and basic. So different from those awful cities. This is *real*."

His smug, happy tone annoyed me. "The village is no more real than the city," I said. "It's all make-believe. The towns pretend to be primitive and basic, but they're parasites, completely dependent upon the cities."

Venn ignored me and wandered into the back room. "I could really work here," he said.

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Within three days I had seen all the village had to offer. I had commissioned a set of tapestries, bought some sculptures and pots, and made notes of other things of interest. But when I spoke of moving on, Venn said flatly that he was not ready to leave.

"I'm just getting settled," he said. "I may be able to get some work done at last — it will all be spoiled if you keep uprooting me. You go on and do what you have to — I'll stay here."

I lingered, hoping he would change his mind. I didn't believe him when he promised to wait for me. If I left without him, I should lose him. Not to his work — I didn't believe that solitude and work could satisfy Venn for long. He was a man who needed an audience — a full-time audience. I had failed him, and he would be searching for another.

In the end, though, I left, going away by myself in the hired car. I could not cajole him into accompanying me, and I did have my work to do.

When I returned, three weeks later, I found the house empty. It looked just as it had on the day we had arrived. Everything, including my own belongings, was neatly in place, and there was no sign of Venn. I knew then, as I looked around, hoping against hope to find some sign of him in the four empty rooms, that Venn had left me. It was over — but I went in search of him anyway.

I learned of a recital in the town hall that evening, and I went there, discovering that Venn was to be one of the performers. I took my seat in the audience, and I don't think he saw me when he emerged on stage with his guitar. He was in good voice, and I recognized one of the songs he sang from our time together. He looked relaxed and handsome in a white tunic and black trousers. His face was transformed when he sang; he was distant and untouchable. I ached, wanting him.

When Venn had finished his set, it was all I could do to stay in my seat and not go in search of him. I was oblivious to the performers who followed, trapped in my thoughts of Venn. Only one musician reached me, in spite of myself. When Reni Laer walked on stage and put his bone flute to his lips, I knew only the music, and the tears poured down my face as his liquid sorrow flowed into me and wrapped around my heart. *Too late, too late. Gone forever.*

After Reni Laer's music, the concert was ended. There was a reception in a side-hall, and only Reni Laer did not stay for the drinks and the praise and the gossip. It was as well — words were inadequate in the face of his music. His departure seemed to free the rest of us from a kind of spell, and words and trivialities were possible once again.

I saw Venn and Wara Duleen. They were together — not touching, but the way they stood told me everything I had still hoped not to know.

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"Venn," I said quietly.

He turned, a drink in one hand, glowing with success. Wara, too, turned to look, and she, too, was bright with happiness. Her eyes passed over me. It was clear she did not know me.

Venn's expression changed. The glow was still there, but caution banked it slightly. He touched Wara's arm, a casual, proprietary gesture. "Excuse me a moment."

Together we walked away from the party. I scarcely knew where we went, I was in such a state. All my nerves were vibrating with his nearness, while at the same time the sick, empty feeling inside told me it was too late. He was gone, and I could not win him back. He led me, finally, down a hall and through a door onto a small balcony overlooking the village. But even outside in the open air I felt stifled. Behind me, Venn closed the door, shutting out the last sounds of the party.

"I didn't expect to see you here tonight," he said. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

I turned on him. "You didn't *want* me back — soon or at all," I said. "I was gone barely three weeks — is that so long? I've thought of you — if you knew how I've thought of you...."

He gazed at me calmly, almost indulgently, and my heart sank. He was safe from me, from anything I might say. I didn't matter to him at all.

"I'm not sorry to see you," he said. "But this might not be the best time or place to talk."

"We'll go back home," I said. "We can talk there."

He shook his head. "You know that my home is with Wara Duleen."

I closed my eyes. "I know," I said. Then I looked at him again. "Can't you spare me one evening? Come home with me and tell me why you left."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Thank you," I said angrily. I was hoping he would touch me, but he did not.

"There's no point to this. It's over between us," he said.

"It's over for *you*."

"You can't pretend you're surprised."

I exhaled sharply and turned to look at the dark, ugly village. "No," I said. "But I'm hurt. Don't *you* pretend I'm not."

And still he wouldn't touch me. "You'll get over it," he said. "I know I sound cruel. But you knew from the start, from the moment you picked me up in that bar — it was only a matter of time."

"We were both lonely and bored," I said. "All right. But ... you meant more to me than that. You came to mean more to me."

"Did I?" His voice was cold; he was reminding me that I had hurt him first, however inadvertently.

"You think I didn't love you enough," I said. "You didn't give me a chance."

"It's too late now; it's pointless to talk about."

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I turned to face him again. "I've had my allotment of your attention, right? Now it's Wara's turn. How long will you give her?"

He frowned. "I love her."

"Do you? God help her." Suddenly I remembered, and the bitter realization made me laugh, although there was nothing amusing about the thought. "You've got just what you want, don't you? If she loves you, she loves you for life. They don't play around here on Habille. She wasn't raised the way you and I were. She's yours. Forever. She won't get tired of you; you don't have to fear losing her. But what happens to her when you feel like moving on? You won't be able to make out that it's her fault. You'll destroy her."

"I'm not going to destroy her — I'll never hurt her," he said, hating me. "I'll love her forever."

"They mean something different by 'forever' on Habille," I said. "They may mean something else by love, too. I don't know, and neither do you. Wara Duleen will take you at your word, as if you were a native. What will she do when you stop loving her?"

He moved away from me, towards the door. "I know you're hurt," he said. "But you're wrong. You don't know anything about me. You think that because I couldn't love you, I can't love anyone. I know what love is, now. Habille isn't the only place where love lasts forever. Long ago, our ancestors...."

"Told themselves pretty stories about love," I said. I shook my head, knowing it was too late. "It's different here. The people here are different. We come of the same stock, but the centuries — and our worlds — have changed us in different ways. You're not capable of their sort of love anymore than I am — anymore than an antelope is. Sooner or later, your 'forever' will come to an end, and you'll leave her. You'll do what to her is an utter impossibility, and I don't know how she'll cope with it. She may go mad, or kill herself — or kill you. If you leave her, you'll shake her whole concept of reality."

"I won't leave her," he said flatly. By his voice, he might have been swearing a solemn oath. "I'm as good as married to her now. Forever."

Since that night, nearly ten years have passed. I never thought to see Venn again, although I often thought of him — sometimes with regret, sometimes with anger, sometimes with nostalgic warmth.

But last night I saw him.

I had been thinking about him, alone in my hotel room — in one of the better hotels in New Denver — feeling bored and trying to find some occupation for the evening. I learned that a musician from Habille would be performing in the hotel lounge, and the reminder of Habille sent my thoughts flying back to Venn.

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I wondered how long he had been content to stay on that dull world with his true love — I wondered how, or if, Wara Duleen had managed to survive his desertion. That he *had* deserted her I never doubted. I knew Venn — or I had known him — very well; my expectations were realistic, not cynical.

I thought also of Reni Laer, and the emotions I had felt upon hearing his music, and I was suddenly desirous of hearing it again. The name of the musician performing that night had not been given, but I thought it must be Reni Laer. I called in my reservation and began to dress, brooding still on times past.

The hotel lounge was furnished only with a thick, cushiony purple rug; the stage was a cleared circular space in the center. There were perhaps a hundred people present, sitting or reclining on the floor, filling the room. I gazed around without really looking. I expected to recognize no one. So I let the faces blur together.

Then the room darkened, except for a center spotlight, and a woman stepped into the circle of light.

A woman — at first I was disappointed, thinking of Reni Laer. Then I recognized Wara Duleen.

I had seen her only twice, and that ten years ago, and the years had not been kind to her. But I knew her. She was still beautiful, although her formerly creamy complexion was rougher and darker now, and her face was thinner. She wore a long, dark-green dress and a somber expression, and she carried a bone flute.

That startled me. I'd had the impression that she played a different instrument, something with strings.

Wara Duleen stood still and quiet in her circle of light. She gazed straight ahead but seemed unaware that she had an audience. Then, without preamble, she raised the white flute to her lips and began.

Only twice before in my life had I heard music which affected me so strongly, so physically. This music weakened me; I felt as if some giant rough hand had touched me. I felt utterly alone in the world, abandoned, betrayed, bruised by fate. It was a pain beyond tears, beyond words.

And then it stopped. The room was silent; all of us, too stunned to respond.

Wara Duleen put her flute to her lips again and played.

This time, she soothed us. I closed my eyes. There was pain and longing in the music, but it was bearable. The music moved through me with the promise of comfort. People died and could not be brought back, but still the world went on. Still there was life, was music, was caring and warmth and memory. I felt lonely but strong.

There was a slight stirring when the song ended, then a hesitant smattering, then a torrent of applause. Wara Duleen stood in her circle of light, untouched by it, and when it had passed, she gave us more of her incomparable music.

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I don't know how long she gave herself to us, only that one moment there was music, and the next there was not, and she was bowing and walking away from the light. A man in the uniform of the hotel announced a reception in half an hour in the same room, an opportunity for all of us to meet the artist Wara Duleen.

We needed that half-hour interval to leave the realm of music and return to ordinary life. We all sat blinking and dazed in the dim room. Gradually, the lights increased and the carpeting beneath us began to change form, becoming less comfortable and encouraging us to get to our feet. A platoon of uniformed waiters entered the room with trays of drinks, and their arrival started the well-known party responses, the growing buzz of conversation, the slow movement about the room, the clustering and laughing and drinking. As I looked around for someone to engage in conversation, my attention was caught by a much too familiar face.

"Venn?" I said wonderingly. It couldn't be Venn, I thought — he looked too much the same. Ten years had not changed him a bit.

His eyes came up — he had been staring broodingly at the floor — and focused on me. Blankness, and then recognition lit his eyes, and he called my name and stepped forward, smiling at me.

"Venn, I don't believe it! To see you again! What are you doing here?"

But even as I spoke, I made the connection. He was still with her, then. I had been wrong in imagining I knew him so well. I felt a pang — one part hope, three parts jealousy. Quickly, so he wouldn't know what I had wrongly assumed, I said, "How are you and Wara these days?"

I knew that hurt, faintly disbelieving look that appeared on his face. "She doesn't see me," he said. "She won't forgive me."

"You left her."

He frowned and fidgeted slightly. "Yes. Didn't you predict it? We were very happy at first, but things ... fell apart. And I couldn't bear life on Habille. I couldn't work. Such a dull place. And her music meant more to her than I did." He stopped abruptly, unable to meet my eyes.

"But you're here now," I prompted.

He nodded and met my gaze again. "I shouldn't have left her. Nothing was ever the same afterwards. I went away, but I couldn't stop thinking of her. I wrote to her and told her I was sorry and wanted to see her again, but she never replied. I couldn't afford passage back to her, but she could have sent me the money — she was doing well by then. It's almost as if my leaving made it possible for her — I've waited for the chance to see her again. She'll have to listen to me tonight."

I felt faintly sick. Listening to his self-righteous tone, I found it amazing that I had ever thought myself in love with him. I wondered if it was Wara's

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success which had drawn him back. I did not think he had found any success for himself. Perhaps he found it harder to keep his lovers interested, too.

"Why force yourself on her?" I said. "If she can't face you, or doesn't want to be reminded of you, why torture her? She's had to adjust as best she could—"

"I love her!" He stared at me, outraged. "I want another chance. She was supposed to love me forever — she *must* still love me."

"Perhaps she does," I said, keeping my voice low. "But what of it? When you left her, you forfeited that. She's had to deal with the fact that you went away — an unthought of event on Habille. You should know better than I — you lived there, among those people. If she's managed to make a life for herself without you, let her keep it. Don't force her to see you."

The rhythms of conversation around us had altered. I looked around, away from Venn's refusal to believe in any pain beyond his own, and saw that Wara Duleen had appeared in the doorway. I glanced at Venn and saw that he was staring at her intently, as if willing her to look his way. I wanted no more part of his uncomprehending cruelty, and I walked away without another word.

Wara Duleen stepped into the crowded room wearing a faint, shy smile, and that expression suddenly made her more human and accessible. Her music might be miraculous, but she herself was not.

I noticed that she wore her strange white flute on a silken cord around her neck, so that it lay against her chest. Was it bone, I wondered — was it like Reni Laer's flute? Moving slowly within the constantly shifting crowd, I gradually drew near enough to hear her speak.

"Thank you," she said again and again in response to the half-articulated praise rising from those around her. "Thank you. But the credit must go as much to Venn, my ... flute." Her slender fingers caressed the white bone, stark against her green dress.

I stopped short at the name. "Your husband?" I said. I had not meant to speak to her, but only to get away before Venn made his scene.

She turned her head swiftly and her eyes took me in. "You are from Habille?"

I saw no recognition in her eyes. I shook my head. "I've been there. I thought your flute was made of bone."

Her fingers curled protectively around the flute, and she nodded. "A part of my late husband," she said. "The physical reminder of him. His spirit lives on in the music we make together. He was a musician, too."

The conviction in her voice made me look around, almost thinking I had imagined Venn. But there he stood, still staring intently at the woman who had been his wife. I looked back at Wara Duleen and wondered if her world would survive if she was

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brought face to face with Venn. Would she accept him as a miracle, returned from the grave? Or would she simply refuse to recognize him?

The crowd carried her away as I stood reflecting; it carried her towards Venn. After a moment of indecision, I followed. She had adjusted reality to cope with the unimaginable, I thought. Perhaps that made her mad, but, if so, it was a magnificent — even enviable — madness, certainly preferable to Venn's sullen persistence.

I saw Venn approach her; I heard him call her name. It was obvious that she did not hear him, but a movement within the group around her suddenly brought her face to face with him. She looked straight at him and did not see him — I was certain she did not see him.

"Wara," he said gently and smiled his most appealing smile.

Wara Duleen touched the bone that lay on her chest, a thoughtful, faraway expression on her face, and stepped forward.

Venn stood still, directly in her path, still smiling, apparently certain that she saw him. But she did not see him. She continued to walk forward. And when she should have run full into him, she did not. She walked right through him. He became as insubstantial as a vapor, less than a ghost, as her body passed through his. She shivered slightly, as if some cold memory from the past had brushed her mind, but she did not stop or look back.

And then, behind her now, Venn was standing there again. He turned, frowning, to look after her, unable to comprehend how she had passed him when neither he nor she had stepped aside.

Then, unable to give up, not realizing he was dead, Venn trailed plaintively after her, waiting for another chance.

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Next month: DESERT OF STOLEN DREAMS, the brand-new Majipoor novella by ROBERT SILVERBERG. July: THE SLOW MUTANTS, a new gunslinger story by STEPHEN KING. August: POLYPHEMUS, a gripping new sf novella by MICHAEL SHEA. Use the coupon on page 48.

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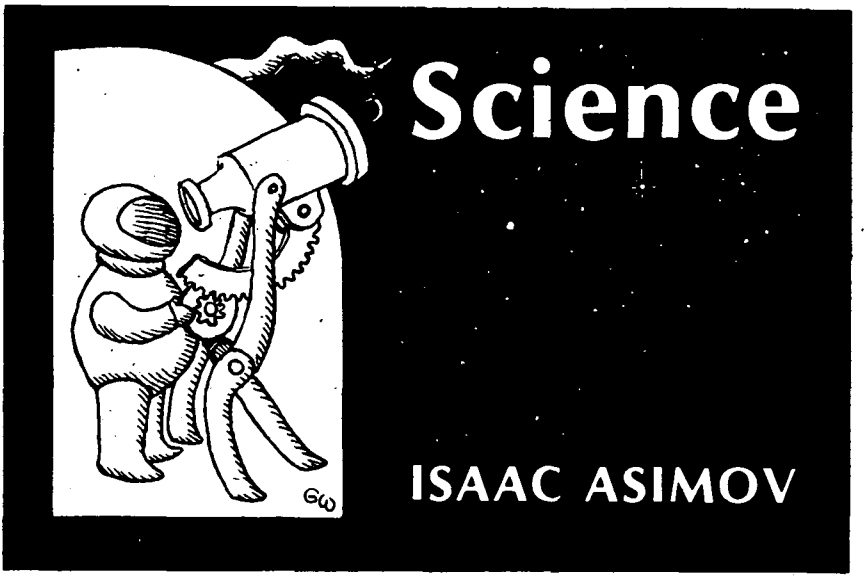

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

UNDER PRESSURE

As some of you may have noted, with varying degrees of resignation or indignation, I am a devotee of word-play. I get a great deal of innocent fun out of such things, for the groans of the audience are music to my ears — especially when my reputation is so vile in this respect that a pun is suspected even when I had intended none.

Recently, in the course of a discussion on population growth, I said that it took a woman nine months to have a baby and that no labor-saving device had yet been invented that—

And at this point, a chorus of groans rose in the air, and I had to think back on what I had said to find the wit. Having found it, I smiled modestly as though I had intended it all along.

It changes from fun to a serious duel, however, when one punster finds another. The other does not enjoy your cleverness. No, he sits there under pressure and tries to top you with another pun that is related to yours. Then, when the shock of his riposte strikes you, you must churn your brains wildly to come back with something else with a minimum of delay, and so the duel escalates itself, until the two of you have to be led away by

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kindly bystanders and put to bed with ice-caps on each fevered brow.

I name no names, which is why I am careful not to mention Mark Chartrand, Director of the Hayden Planetarium.

Recently, I met a pleasant dentist and his attractive wife, and they and Janet and I had several interesting conversations. On one occasion, after discussing science fiction movies, with special attention to "Star Wars," he said, as he departed, "The dental blessing on you."

"Oh?" said I. "What's that?"

And he said, "May the floss be with you!"

I laughed so hard, I didn't get a chance to top him, which filled me with chagrin. Had I had my breath available to me, I could instantly have come back with the gambler's blessing, "May the horse be with you!" or the henpecked husband's blessing, "May divorce be with you!" or the sinner's blessing, "May remorse be with you!" or even the blabbermouth's blessing, "May discourse be with you!" and so on.

Oh, well, I was spared the duel and the pressure, and that means enough pressure is left me to carry on the discussion that took up the essays in the preceding two issues.

From the earliest days of chemistry it was quite understood that varying temperature affected the properties of substances and the manner in which they underwent chemical reactions. Raise the temperature of ice and it melts; raise the temperature of a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen and it explodes.

Changes in pressure will also alter properties and reactions, but it is a great deal more difficult to change pressure significantly than temperature. Prehistoric human beings could change temperature merely by use of fire, and had been cooking food, smelting ores, baking clay, making glass — all as a result of chemical changes produced or accelerated by rising temperatures.

Yet they had no way of altering pressure substantially except by hammering. The first to study changes in property with pressure systematically was the British scientist Robert Boyle (1627-1691). In 1662, he experimented with air under the pressure produced by the weight of mercury and found that air was compressible and that its volume shrank in proportion as pressure increased.

This was a strong piece of evidence in favor of the fact that gases were composed of tiny particles of matter sparsely strewn through vacuum. Pressure crowded the particles closer together, reducing the overall vol-

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ume, but when the pressure was removed the particles separated, as though by a natural spring-like reaction, to their original volume. (Boyle called it "the spring of the air.")

Eventually, when the atomic theory was accepted, this was precisely the explanation accepted to explain the compressibility of air and of gases generally.

Liquids and solids could not be measurably compressed in this manner by the pressures available to Boyle and those who immediately followed him, and this made sense, too. The ultimate particles of matter (that is, the atoms, and the atom-combinations called molecules) were in contact in liquids and solids, and once they were in contact it might be supposed that they could not be moved closer together and there could be no further compression.

In 1762, however, the English physicist John Canton (1718-1772) demonstrated before the Royal Society that water was indeed slightly compressible. After all, even if water consists of atoms and molecules in contact, there are different types of packing, some more compact than others, and atoms and molecules might be distorted or even outright compressed into closer fits.

Unfortunately, once the atomic theory was accepted, it was also fashionable to think of atoms as truly ultimate — indivisible, undistortable, impenetrable. There was no experimental evidence for this, but the ancient Greek philosophers who had first dreamed up atoms had asserted this, and 19th-century chemists found it difficult to abandon the pied pipers of Hellenism.

The result was that it was casually accepted that liquids and solids, with atoms and molecules in contact, were incompressible despite experimental results to the contrary. (I was taught as much when I was young by high-school teachers who knew no better, and discovering that this was not so came as a shock to me at first.)

It was true, though, that if liquids and solids were compressible, they were not easily compressible, and throughout the 19th Century, pressure experiments continued to deal with gases almost exclusively. Pressure did not merely compress gases. Some gases (not all) were liquefied by pressure alone, or at most, by pressure and moderate cooling. It was the effort to extend this effect to all gases (see COUNTDOWN, F & SF, September 1978) that first led scientists into the realm of high pressure.

The French physicist Émile Hilaire Amagat (1841-1915) was a pioneer in this respect. By applying mechanical pressure to a small volume and devis-

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ing seals that were particularly efficient, he managed to reach pressures as high as 3,000 atmospheres in the 1880's.

But even the best seals leak under sufficient pressure. Attempts to reach more than 3,000 atmospheres failed because the seals gave way — and yet it was no mean accomplishment. Amagat reached pressures three times those in the deepest portion of the oceanic abyss.

In 1905, the American physicist, Percy William Bridgman (1882-1961) was working for his Ph.D. at Harvard. He was studying the behavior of certain optical phenomena under the influence of pressure and began to interest himself in the problem of reaching higher and higher levels of pressure.

He worked out ingenious seals that would retain fluid under more and more stringent conditions. He soon reached a pressure of 12,000 atmospheres and then, in successively improved devices, went to 20,000, then 30,000, then 50,000, then 100,000 and then, finally, to an occasional 425,000 atmospheres. In 1946, he earned a Nobel Prize in physics for his high-pressure work.

Bridgman was the first who could fiddle around usefully with the atomic arrangements of liquids and solids, and this opened up the possibility of some pretty dramatic accomplishments.

For instance, graphite and diamond are both made up of carbon atoms only (see THE UNLIKELY TWINS, F & SF, October 1972). Diamond, however, has a density that is 1.56 times as great as that of graphite. That is because the carbon atoms in diamond are packed more compactly than are those in graphite.

Suppose graphite is placed under pressure. The carbon atoms, pushed together with greater and greater force, finally yield and take up the more compact diamond-configuration. It takes enormous pressure to do this, however, so it is no wonder that attempts prior to Bridgman's time to turn graphite to diamond all failed.

Even Bridgman found the pressures he disposed of incapable of doing the job unaided. If, however, the graphite were heated, the grip of each carbon atom on its neighbors is weakened, and the pressure necessary to force those atoms to rearrange into the diamond configuration is reduced to manageable proportions. In 1955, a combination of high temperature and high pressure allowed the formation of diamonds from graphite for the first time.

Once the pressure is removed, the tendency is for the carbon atoms in diamond to revert to the graphite configuration in a kind of "spring of car-

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bon" effect. However, the carbon atoms are held together so tightly once they're in the diamond configuration that they can revert to graphite only with excessive slowness.

Diamonds are unstable, in the strictest sense of the word, but it is a very slow-motion instability that makes them as good as stable for all practical purposes. Something that is unstable in theory and stable in practice is said to be "metastable."

The formation of diamond was dramatic indeed, but earlier, Bridgman had done work on ordinary water that, in its way, produced the more startling results.

Water freezes into ice at 0 C. (32 F.). Ice, however, has a density that is only 0.92 that of liquid water. The molecules of water (each made up of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom) are loosely arranged in ice, though they are, after a fashion, in contact, and are more compactly arranged in water.

This means that just as pressure alone can change graphite into the more compact diamond, so pressure alone can change ice into the more compact water. What's more, the bonds holding the water molecules to each other in ice are far feebler than those holding the carbon atoms together in graphite. Pressure therefore effects the ice-to-water change much more easily and readily than it would effect the graphite-to-diamond change.

Even a relatively small amount of pressure applied to ice that is not too far from the freezing point, will cause it to melt, and it will have to be cooled down to a lower-than-normal temperature to make it freeze again. It is calculated that each additional atmosphere of pressure over and above the normal reduces the freezing point by 0.0075 C. (0.0135 F.) If you place ice under a pressure of 135 atmospheres, it will freeze at -1 C. (30.2 F.)

The sharp edge of the blade of an ice-skate supports the total weight of an ice-skater. Since the blade covers only a tiny area of the ice, the weight of the skater, concentrated on that area, produces a huge, though local, pressure.

If the weather isn't too cold, the freezing point under the blade is lowered to below the atmospheric temperature and the ice melts. There is thus a thin film of water under the blade which acts as a lubricant and makes ice-skating a good deal smoother than it would be if this phenomenon didn't exist.

The act of skating does not, however, melt the ice on the pond permanently, for when the skate leaves the area it had covered, the water-film it

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had formed returns to ordinary pressures and freezes again at once. Water is present only immediately under the skate blade and nowhere else.

Again, suppose a weight is suspended from a loop of thin, strong wire which is thrown over a block of ice maintained at a temperature just below its freezing point.

Under the thin wire, the pressure is enormous and the ice melts. The wire sinks through the water, which freezes above the wire. The wire continues to melt the ice underneath and to sink, and finally works its way entirely through the block of ice, which remains as solid and unbroken as ever.

Suppose you place very large pressures on the ice and lower the temperature steadily to prevent it from melting under that pressure. At a pressure of 2,047 atmospheres, the freezing point of water is -22.0 C (-7.6 F) — and then an odd thing happens. The water molecules in the ice rearrange into more compact solid form and you no longer have ice, at least not our ordinary ice. It is customary to call ordinary ice "Ice I," while the new form of ice is "Ice III."

Ice III has a more compact molecular arrangement than Ice I and even then liquid water. Ice III is denser than water and would sink in it whereas Ice I (as we know) floats.

If the pressure is increased still further, the tendency now is for water to be compressed into the more compact Ice III so the freezing point rises, At 3,417 atmospheres, the freezing point of water is up to -17.0 C (1.4 F) and Ice III then squeezes into the still more compact and dense Ice V. (You can tell these shifts, by the way, by the sudden changes in volume that take place.)

The freezing point rises still more sharply thereafter with pressure increase, and at 6,175 atmospheres, it is 0.16 C (32.29 F) or just about the ordinary freezing temperature we know and love — except that the pressure is enormous and Ice V crushes into a slightly more compact Ice VI.

At the enormous pressure of 21,700 atmospheres, the freezing point is at 81.6 C (178.9 F) and ice VII forms. Its density is 1.7 times that of water (and 1.85 times that of Ice I). Its freezing point rises yet more rapidly with increasing pressure, and somewhere around 23,000 atmospheres, Ice VII's melting point is at 100 C (212 F), which is the boiling point of water under ordinary conditions. Imagine solid water at the temperature of steam.

Haven't I omitted Ice II and Ice IV in all of this?

Well, Ice II forms at pressures that suffice to form Ice III, but at lower temperatures. Ice II never melts into water. If you imagine it formed at low

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temperatures and then slowly raise the temperature without altering the pressure, Ice II will reach a point where it will change into Ice III or Ice V (depending on what the pressure is), and it is these latter that eventually melt into water as the temperature is further raised.

As for Ice IV, it is only metastable. It forms at low temperatures but will change spontaneously into other Ice-forms in time.

There is also an Ice VIII that forms at low temperatures at very high pressures. If its temperature is raised, it turns into Ice VI or Ice VII, and it is these that eventually melt to water with a further temperature rise.

Of all the eight Ice-forms, only Ice I is less dense than water, only Ice I is stable at ordinary pressures and only Ice I exists in nature. The ocean pressures even at their deepest are only half what is required to form Ice III, the next more compact form. And if the ocean's depth were doubled and sea-floor pressure became sufficient, the temperature wouldn't be low enough for the task.

What is more, all those compact Ice-forms, if the pressure were released, would quickly revert to Ice I. The weak bonds between the molecules would not suffice to hold them compactly against the tendency to relax and spread out under low pressure. Ice is not diamond.

(In one of his novels, Kurt Vonnegut invented an "Ice IX" which was metastable, retained its integrity at ordinary temperatures and pressures and which, what's more, would serve as a seed that would convert Earth's entire water supply into Ice IX and, therefore, make all life impossible. You will be glad to know that however interesting it made the novel, Ice IX or any Ice-form with that set of properties cannot exist in the real Universe.)

But wait. If we are talking about naturally-occurring high pressure on Earth, the ocean is by no means the limit. The ocean is made up of water which has a depth of only 11 kilometers (7 miles) at most (see TOO DEEP FOR ME, F & SF, April 1981).

The solid ball of the Earth, on the other hand, goes 6,378 kilometers (3,963 miles) straight down to the center, calculating from a point on the equator. The pressure rises steadily as we imagine ourselves delving underground. The average density of the surface rocks is 2.8 times that of water, and if the density of the Earth's structure remained that way all the way down, then one atmosphere would be added for each 3.7 meters we would go downward.

At a depth of a little over half a kilometer, the pressure would be high enough to form Ice III, but Ice II requires a temperature no higher than -22

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C, and at a depth of half a kilometer, the temperature of the rocks is about 44 C (112 F) which is considerably too high.

At a depth of 6.2 kilometers, the pressure is high enough to form Ice VII under conditions where it is solid at the ordinary boiling point of water, but down there, the temperature of the rocks is well above that boiling point and stands at about 200 C (390 F).

Even if there were water low enough in the rock of the solid Earth to experience pressures to form compact Ice-forms, the temperatures would always be too high. Again, then, I say that only Ice I occurs anywhere on Earth.

If the density of the Earth were a uniform 2.8 times that of water all the way through, then the density at the center of the Earth would be something like 1,700,000 atmospheres, or about 1,600 times that at the bottommost trench of the ocean.

Actually, though, the increasing pressures force the atoms and molecules in the rock to move closer together and to take up more compact configurations. By the time we get to a depth of 2,900 kilometers (1,800 miles) the density of the rock has more than doubled over the surface value and is about 5.8 times that of water. (These changes in density can be calculated from the speed with which earthquake waves travel through the Earth at different depths — something we don't have to go into here.)

At the depth of 2,900 kilometers (1,800 miles) there is a sudden sharp increase in density to about 9.5 times that of water, and it then increases smoothly until it is about 11.5 times that of water at the center of the Earth. The portion of the Earth down to that 2,900-kilometer rise is the "mantle," while the portion of the Earth below that rise is the "core."

Taking into account the increasing density with depth, the weight of overlying rock at any given point (and therefore the pressure) must be higher than it would be if the rock were of uniform density. The figure of 1,700,000 atmospheres at the center is too low, therefore.

Actually, the central pressure is about double this and can be put at 3,500,000 atmospheres. This amounts to 25,718 *tons* per square inch, or 36,000,000,000 kilograms per square meter. If we use the SI unit system then we can say the pressure at the Earth's center is 355,000,000,000 newtons per square meter, or that many pascals.

That sudden increase at a depth of 2,900 kilometers (1,800 miles) can only take place if there is a sharp alteration in Earth's composition. The rock must come to an end, and something denser must take its place. The

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only substance that can be substantially denser would have to be largely or entirely metal, and the most common metal in the Universe that is dense enough to fit the data is iron.

As it happens, a number of meteors are almost pure iron and nickel in a 10 to 1 ratio (nickel is a metal very similar to iron in chemical properties). If such meteors are remnants of an exploded planet (a popular and dramatic theory in past decades), then this may be a good sign that the dense central core of the Earth is a nickel-iron alloy. This was, in fact, first suggested as long ago as 1866 by the French physicist Gabriel Auguste Daubrée (1814-1896).

What's more, the core is hot enough for the nickel-iron to be liquid, though the mantle is solid. This is not surprising, for the mantle is at a somewhat lower temperature than the core, and rock has a higher melting point than iron.

But if the Earth consists of two portions, a rocky outside wrapped about an iron inside, this must have developed. It can't be that first a mass of nickel iron accumulated and then, when that was done, a mass of rock formed about it. No, bits and pieces of all types must have come together into a more or less chaotically distributed melange of different substances, whereafter the iron must have separated out and settled to the bottom.

Of course, it's easy to say "must have," but did the iron actually do so? It's difficult to come to any sensible decisions when all the evidence we have at our disposal consists of earthquake waves and shaky reasoning based on meteorites and the presumed behavior of materials at high temperatures and pressures.

We need some more direct evidence, and Peter M. Bell of Carnegie Institution is trying to supply it. He has made use of a device which squeezes materials between two diamonds (diamond being the hardest substance known) and with it has managed to reach pressures of 1,500,000 atmospheres, over 2/5 that at the Earth's center. (He believes it is possible for the instrument to go to 17,000,000 atmospheres before the diamonds themselves fail.

Furthermore, laser beams can be focused through the transparent diamonds to raise the temperature of the material being compressed. Thus, Bell can study the behavior of substances under the kind of temperatures and pressures characteristic of the environment deep within the body of the Earth.

Bell's pressures succeeded in compressing various minerals characteristic of Earth's crust into very compact structures of the kind found naturally

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in a mineral called "perovskite" (a form of calcium titanate). This perovskite structure, he believes, is characteristic of the mantle at depths of more than 800 kilometers (500 miles).

While most types of atoms take up their place in the perovskite structure, iron atoms do not. Bell found that when iron-containing minerals are placed under high temperature and pressure in his apparatus, the iron atoms leak out of the perovskite structure and collect as the pure metal.

One can imagine, therefore, Earth forming under the collision of rocky fragments, and growing larger. As it grows larger, the pressures and temperatures within grow higher. As they do, more and more of the compact perovskite structure forms, and any iron atoms present are squeezed out and, eventually, because of their high density, collect at the Earth's center.

If this is so, then I wonder how the nickel-iron meteorites formed? If they are not part of the core of an exploded planet (and modern astronomers don't seem to want to accept exploded planets as part of the history of the Solar system), how else could that iron have collected?

Then, too, even Bell's data is a little on the indirect side. It would be delightful to obtain a sample of the core and actually analyze it. The problem is, though, how can one get down to the core to get our sample?

Actually, there is a way. The core may be subjected to analysis in place. The key to this are the neutrinos, which are constantly emerging from the Sun and which (if aimed properly) pass completely through the Earth without trouble, (see THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT, F & SF, November 1979).

When the Sun is above the horizon, the neutrinos reach us and our instruments after having passed across 150 kilometers (93 million miles) of reasonably empty space. When the Sun is below the horizon, the neutrinos reach us and our instruments after having passed through that distance of space, *plus* several thousand kilometers of Earth's structure. Exactly how much of Earth's structure has been traversed and through what depths the neutrinos have passed before reaching us depends on how far below the horizon the Sun is.

Most of the neutrinos passing through the Earth do not interact with any of the matter they penetrate, but a few would, and the details of interaction might vary with temperature, pressure and composition.

If we can develop instruments that will detect neutrinos and obtain a detailed energy spectrum of them, then by comparing daytime neutrinos and nighttime neutrinos, we could conceivably achieve a complete analysis of the Earth's structure at every level.

It's a nice thought — but easier to talk about than to do.

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Edward Bryant, winner of Nebula awards in 1979 and 1980, author of "Strata" (August 1980), offers a tale about The Dragon Festival, a gliding competition full of spectacle and color and danger.

The Thermals of August

BY
EDWARD BRYANT

I see the woman die, and the initial beauty of the event takes away my breath. Later I will feel the sickness of pain, the weakness of sorrow. But for the moment I sit transfixed, face tilted toward the irregular checkerboard of cumulus. The drama of death has always seemed to me the truest element in life.

The other diners see what I had detected a moment before: a tiny irregularity in the smooth sweep of the newly launched kite. The kite is cobalt blue and dart-shaped, apparently a modified Rogallo wing — not one of the Dragons we'll all be flying later in the week.

Having come to the outdoor cafe by Bear Creek for a late breakfast, I'd hoped simply to satisfy a necessary but unwanted need. Now, however, the bite of croissant lies dry in my mouth and the cup of coffee cools undrunk. Perhaps I did not really see the minute lurch in the kite's path. I allow myself that one brief luxuriant hope, staring at the kite and its pilot more than two thousand feet above the valley floor. The kite is a vivid midge against the lighter blue of the sky.

Then the kite falls.

I see the craft first slip into a stall, then nose downward — no problem for even a moderately experienced pilot. But suddenly half the wing folds back at an unnatural angle. In a little more than a second, we on the ground hear the twang and snap of breaking control wires and twisting aluminum frame.

The kite tumbles.

I am surrounded by babble and one of the other diners begins to whimper.

It seems to take forever to fall.

My brain coolly goes to work and I know that the descent is far more rapid

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in terms of feet per second than it appears to our eyes.

At first the kite fell like a single piece of confetti pitched from a Wall Street window. Now the collapsed portion of the wing has wrapped around pilot and harness, and the warped mass rotates as it appears to us to grow larger.

The crippled kite twists and spins, flutters and falls like a leaf of aspen. I think I see the shrouded form of the pilot, a pendulum flung outward by centripetal force.

The kite's fall seems to accelerate as it nears ground, but that also is illusion. Someone screams at us to take cover, evidently thinking that the kite will plunge into the midst of the outdoor diners. It doesn't. The kite makes half a final revolution and spins into the corner of the Conoco Building. The cocooned pilot slams into the brick with the flat smack of a beef roast dropped onto kitchen tile. The wreckage drapes over the temporary barbed-wire fence protecting this building under perpetual reconstruction.

The bit of croissant still lies on my tongue. I feel every sharp edge. I gag and taste bitterness coat my throat.

The dead-moth corpse of the kite is not more than fifty feet away, and the crowd slowly begins to close the distance. I am among them. The others grant me a wide path because most recognize that I too am a pilot. "Let the woman through." Gingerly I approach my fallen comrade.

Her body is almost totally swathed in the cobalt fabric of the kite. I can see her face; her eyes stare open and unpeacefully. The concealed contours of her body are smooth. I suspect most of the bones of her body are splintered.

When I softly touch one of her shoulders, I inadvertently drag one tightly folded flap of kitewing against a steel barb. Pooled blood bursts forth in a brief cataract. Mixed with the scent of her blood is the odor of urine.

This is not death; it is indignity.

My nylon windbreaker is composed of my colors: gold and black. I take it off and cover the dead woman's face. Then I glare around the circle of onlookers. Most of them stare at the ground and mumble, then turn and leave.

I draw back the jacket for a moment and lightly kiss the dead woman's lips.

I love this town between festivals. Living among the stable population of two thousand refreshes me after months of engulfment in the cities of the coasts. I am pleased by the ambivalent socialness of friendly greetings on the street, but without anyone pushing me to respond further. Warm people who hold a fetish of privacy are an impossible paradox elsewhere. This town prides itself on paradox.

The rules do not always hold true in the public downtown, particularly during the festivals. The outsiders flood in at various times of the year for

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their chamber music and jazz festivals, art symposiums, video circus, and other, more esoteric gatherings.

Although the present festival will not begin until tomorrow at dawn, the town is crowded with both participants and spectators. Tonight people fill the bars downtown and spill out onto the sidewalks along both sides of Main. Though August is not yet ended, the cold crisps the night. The town is at nearly nine thousand feet, and chill is to be expected; but the plumes of breath billow more than one would expect. The stars are clear and icy tonight; I see clouds scudding up the valley from the west.

There is a shifting, vibrant energy in the crowds that runs like quicksilver. I can feel it. The moon tonight is new, so I can't ascribe anything to lunar influence. The magic must generate from the gestalt interaction of the flyers and the watchers. Or, more likely, from the ancient mountains that ring us on three sides.

The air seems most charged in the Club Troposphere, the street-front bar on the ground floor of the Ionic Hotel. I have a table in one of the Trope's raised bay display windows overlooking the sidewalk. The crowd flux continually alters, but at any given moment at least a dozen others share the table with me. Some stand, some sit, and in the crowd din, body language communicates at least as much as words. I'm stacking empties of imported beers in front of my glass. This early in the evening, my pyramid looks more Aztec than Egyptian.

I continue to taste blood; the thick, dark ale won't wash it away. Before I truly realize what I'm doing, I grasp the latest empty by the neck and slam it down on the hardwood. "God *damn!*" Amber glass sprays across the table, and I raise the jagged edges of the neck to the level of my eyes.

"Mairin!" Across the table I see Lark look up from nuzzling Haley's throat. "Mairin, are you all right?" he says. Haley stares at me as well. Everyone at the table is staring at me.

"I dropped it," I say. I set the severed neck down beside my glass.

Lark gets up from Haley's lap and comes around the table to me. I stare from one to the other of the vertices of my present triangle. Lark is small, compact and dark, with the sense of spatial orientation and imagination and the steel muscles, all of which make him a better Dragon pilot than anyone else here. With the probable exception of me. Haley is tall and light, a woman of the winter with silky hair to her waist and eyes like ice chipped from inaccessible glaciers. But when she smiles, the ice burns.

"Are you okay?" Lark places his fingers lightly on the hand with which I smashed the bottle. I move the hand and pick up my glass. A barmaid hovers beside us, wiping shards into a paper towel.

I nod. "It was an accident."

Lark puts his face very close to

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mine. "The rookie who died today — you saw the whole thing, right?"

"I saw her get into the truck for the ride up to the point. She was very young. I didn't know her."

"She was good," Lark says. "I know people who flew with her in the Midwest. Today she was very unlucky."

"Obviously."

"Than's not what I meant." Lark smiles in the way I've learned to interpret during the long years of competition as all teeth and no mirth. "After the medics took her body away from you practically at gun point, I went over her equipment with the officials. She committed a beginner's error, you know — dipped a wingtip when she went off. Clipped an outcropping."

"I saw," I say. "She recovered."

"We did X-rays. There was a flaw in the metal. That's why the one wing buckled."

"God." I feel sick, dizzy, as though I'm whirling around in that bright cobalt body-bag, waiting for the ground to smash out my life.

"Whoever," Lark says. "Just bad luck." He hesitates. "I keep thinking about all the times I've inspected my own equipment. You can check so much."

Haley has come around the table too and stands close to Lark. "I wonder what it felt like."

"I know," I say. I look at Lark's face and realize he knows too, Haley is an artist and photographer who sticks close to her gallery here in town. She has never flown. She can never know.

I'm really not sure how many beers I've drunk tonight. It must be more than I think I've counted, because I do and say what is uncharacteristic of me. With Lark and Haley both standing there, I look into Haley's winter eyes and say, "I need to be with someone tonight."

"I—Mairin—" Haley almost stutters. She gentles her voice. "Lark asked me already...."

"Lark could un-ask you," I say. I know that's unfair, but I also know my need. Lark is staring studiously out the window, pretending to ignore us both.

Haley says, "Lark was there too, He needs—"

"*I* need." They both stare at me uncomfortably now without speaking. Individually I know how stubborn each can be. Three springs tauten. I want to reach out and be held, to thaw and exhaust myself with body warmth. I want to reach out with the shattered bottle-neck and rip both of them until I bathe in steaming blood. Then it all goes out from me and I sink back in my chair. I am so goddamned suspicious of the word *need* and I have heard it too many times.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm behaving badly."

"Mairin—" both start to say. Lark touches my shoulder. Haley reaches out.

I shove back my chair and get up unsteadily. My head pounds. Nausea

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wracks my belly and I am glad there is no competition for me tomorrow. "I'm going to my room. I don't feel...." I let the words trail off.

"Do you need help?"

"No, Haley. No, love. I can make it." I push past and leave them at the table. I hope I'm leaving my self-pity there too. The lobby of the Ionic is another zoo of milling humans. I make it to the lone elevator where luck has brought the cage to the first floor. As I enter the car, a bearded flyer-groupie in a yellow down jacket unwisely reaches in from the lobby and grabs my wrist.

"Lady, would you like a drink?" he says.

The spring, still taut, ratchets loose. Luckily for him my knee catches him only in the upper thigh and he flails backward into the lobby as spectators gape. The doors close and the elevator climbs noisily toward my floor. Two young men stand nervously in the opposite corner, just as far from me as four feet will allow.

I'll regret all this tomorrow.

I know the woman who comes to me that night.

I am she.

The cotton sheet slides coolly, rustling, as I restlessly change position. I've pushed the down comforter to my knees. It's too hot for that. The cold will come later, past midnight when the hotel lowers all the thermostats.

Finally I despair of sleeping, lie still, lie on my back with my hands beside me. I can see dimly in the light from the frosted-glass transom, as well as the white glow from the hotel neon outside the single window. I hear the muffled sounds of celebration from the street below.

Then I see the woman standing silently at the foot of the bed. I know her. She is short — five-four without shoes. Her body is slender and muscular. The shadows shift as she moves around to the side of my bed. Darkness glides across her eyes, her neck, between her breasts, on her belly and below. Her breasts are small with dark, prominent nipples. Her muscles, when she moves, are not obtrusive but are clearly delineated.

She steps into the light from the street. There are no crows-feet visible in chiaroscuro. Her face is delicately boned, heart-shaped with a chin that misses sharpness by only a degree. Her eyes are wide and as dark as her close-cut hair. In the semidarkness I know I am seeing her as she was when she was twenty and as she will by when she is forty.

I slip the sheet aside as she silently lies in my bed. Slowly, delicately, I slide the fingers of one hand along the side of her face, down the jawline, across her lips. Her lips part slightly and one fingertip touches the firm, moist cushion of her tongue.

Then even more gently I cup her breasts, my palms feeling their warmth

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long before the skin touches the tips of each erect nipple.

It takes a thousand years.

My hands slide down her flanks and touch all that is moist and warm between her legs. I know what to seek out and I find it. The warmth builds.

I think of Haley. I think of Lark. I blink him out. Haley leaves of her own accord and abandons me pleading. My pleading, her leaving.

My finger orbits and touches, touches and orbits, touches. The warmth builds and builds, is more than warmth, builds and heats, the heat — The heat coils and expands, ripples outward, ripples across my belly, down my thighs. For a moment, just a bare moment, something flickers like heat lightning on the horizon—

—but it is not sufficient. I am not warm enough.

Heat radiates and is lost, spent. I see Lark and Haley again in my mind and blink away the man. But Haley leaves too.

Only I am left.

I wish the woman would sleep, but I know her too well.

I wish I could sleep, but I know me so well.

Dragon Festival.

It is nearly dawn and the roar of dragons splits the chilly air. The tongues of propane burners lick the hearts of twenty great balloons. The ungainly shapes bulk in the near darkness and slowly come erect. The crews hold tight to nylon lines.

As the sun starts to rise above the peaks beyond the two waterfalls, I see that snow dusted the San Juans sometime past midnight. The mountains are topped with weresnow — a sifting that came in the night and will shortly vanish with morning sun. The real storms are yet to come with the autumn.

Mythic creatures rear up in the dawn. These are nothing so simple as the spherical balloons of my childhood. Laboratory-bred synthetics have been sculpted and molded to suggest the shapes of legend. A great golden gargoyle hunches to the east. To the west, a hundred-foot-tall gryphon strains at its handlers' lines. The roaring, rushing propane flames animate a sphynx, a satyr, a kraken with basket suspended from its drooping tentacles, a Cheshire cat and chimeras of every combination. The giants bob and dip as they distend, but it is a perfect morning with no wind.

I find a perverse delight in not feeling as wretched as I anticipated last night. My mind is clear. My eyes do not ache. Though I was not able to cope with breakfast food, I did manage to drink tea. I realize I'm being caught up in the exhilaration of the first festival day. I know that within the hour I will be flowing with the wind, floating with the clouds.

"How do you feel this morning?" A familiar voice.

"Did you get any rest?" Another.

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I turn to greet Haley and Lark. "I feel fine. I got some sleep." I determine to leave any qualifications behind.

"I'll see you on the ground," says Lark.

Haley looks at me steadily for several seconds, a time that seems much longer. Finally she draws me close and says, "Good luck. Have a fine flight." Her lips are cool and they touch my cheek briefly.

Lark and she walk toward the balloon called *Cheshire*. I hear fragmented words from a portable public-address system that tell me all flyers should be linking their craft to their respective balloons. I walk across the meadow to *Negwenya*. *Negwenya* is the Zulu word for dragon. *Negwenya* is a towering black and scarlet balloon owned by a man named Robert Simms. Robert's eight-times-removed grandparents were Zulu. Robert is a great believer in the mystique of dragons and sees an occult affinity between *Negwenya* and the Dragon V flyers he ferries up to the sky.

I walk between the serpentine legs of *Negwenya* and feel the sudden chill of entering shadow. The people holding *Negwenya*'s lines, mostly local volunteers, greet me and I answer them back. From where he waits beside my Dragon V, Robert raises a broad hand in welcome. My gold and black glider looks as fragile on the wet grass as it did in the electric glow when I left to watch the coming dawn.

"You ready?" Robert's voice is permanently hoarse from a long-ago accident when a mooring line snapped and lashed around his throat.

"I'm ready." I check the tough lightweight lines that will allow my Dragon to dangle below *Negwenya* as the balloon takes us up to twelve thousand feet. The ends of the lines tuck into safety pressure catches both on the underside of *Negwenya*'s gondola and on my craft's keel tube and wing braces. Either Robert or I can elect at any time to release the catches. Once that happens, *Negwenya* will go on about its own business, and I will describe the great descending spiral that eventually brings me back to earth.

More orders blare from the bullhorn across the field. It doesn't matter that none of us can understand the words; we all know what happens next.

"Let's link up," says Robert.

I nod and climb into my harness under the Five as Robert and a helper hold the wings steady on the support stands. It isn't like getting ready to fly a 767; just a few metallic clicks and the appropriate straps are secured. I pull on my helmet and check the instrumentation: the microprocessor-based unit in the liner records air speed, ground speed, and altitude. The figures appear on a narrow band along the inside of the transparent visor. There is an audible stall warning, but I rarely activate that; I'd rather gauge stability directly from the air flutter on the wing-fabric.

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"Okay, just a few more minutes," says Robert.

I'm glad the Five is resting on the supports. The entire craft may only weigh sixty pounds, but that's half what I weigh. My flight suit feels sticky along the small of my back; I'm sweating. I hear the amplified words of the pageant director continue to fragment on the leading edge of the mountain.

"Time to do it," says Robert. He climbs up the launch ladder and steps into the gondola. Then he looks back over the edge — I see the reflection in the bulge of my visor — and grins. "Good luck, lady." He displays an erect thumb. "Break a leg."

With a rush and a roar, the twenty lighter-than-air craft embark. The paradox is that with all the fury and commotion, the score of balloons rises so slowly. Our ascension is stately.

Excited as ever by the sight, I watch the images of ground things diminish. I see the take-off field swarm with video people; the insect eyes of cameras glitter. From beyond the ropes, the sustained note of the crowd swells with the balloons' first rising.

Harpies, genies, furies all, we soar toward a morning clear but for high cirrus. I fill my lungs with chill clean air and feel the exuberance, the climactic anticipation of that moment when each of us cuts loose the tether from our respective balloon and glides into free flight.

Free is the word, free is the key. I know I'm smiling; and then I feel the broad, loose grin. My teeth ache with the cold, but it doesn't matter. I want to laugh madly and I restrain myself only because I know I can afford to waste none of the precious oxygen at this altitude.

The weather's fine!

I raise a gloved hand to Lark as *Cheshire* slowly rises past *Negwenya*. His brown and yellow wings bob slightly as he waves back. The grin on *Cheshire*'s cat doesn't seem nearly so wide as mine.

The valley town is a parti-colored patchwork. I glance up and scan the line of red figures along my visor. I'm a thousand feet above the meadow. I look from the comfortable brick and frame of the old town to the newer, wooden, fake Victorian homes rising from the mountain's skirts. Now I'm level with the end of the trees and the beginning of bare rock. To the east I look beyond the old Pandora Mill and see sun catch the spray from Ingram Falls and Bridal Veil. The waterfalls have not yet been turned off for the winter.

Toward the top of the canyon, light crosswinds buffet the balloons slightly, as I expected they would. *Negwenya* rotates slowly and I concentrate on feeling no vertigo. We sweep past a sheer rock face to the waves and shouted greetings of a party of climbers strung like colored beads from their ropes. The balloon pilots yell back.

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I can intellectually understand the attraction of technical climbing, but I was never able to appreciate it on a gut level. And I tried. Perhaps the only level on which it communicates to me is: *because it's there. Haley.* I wonder if I should desire Haley so intensely if she were more accessible. Even the anticipation of the coming long flight cannot erase the chill and heat of her from my mind.

"Mairin!"

I hear Robert's shout above the rushing-wind sound of the burner.

"Mairin, are you watching your gauge?"

I hadn't been. *Negwenya*'s at twelve-seven, and it won't be long before we're thirteen thousand feet above sea level. While I was thinking about sapphire eyes, like a rank amateur, the other flyers had been cutting loose from their balloons. Below me I see the looping, swarming flight of Dragons.

I glance at the readouts again. Robert has assured my wind-direction. I drop.

My Dragon V drops away from the gondola, and *Negwenya*'s roar grows faint; then is gone. The silence of my flight enfolds me. I lie prone in my harness, nothing else between me and the valley but air.

I fly for this moment.

The microprocessor's electronic senses tell me hard information: I am two thousand, nine hundred and sixty-two feet above the valley floor. My air speed is twenty-two miles per hour, only slightly less than my ground speed. My Dragon V presently travels nearly twelve feet horizontally for every foot it drops. In a minute I will lose about two hundred feet. Without searching out the thermal currents, I'll reach the ground in about fifteen minutes.

I pay no attention to the readouts. For the moment, the silence and openness, the caress of air on my face, all stir a complex reaction in my mind and body. I feel the throbbing start, far inside.

The slight shift of my body affects the attitude of my flight. The Dragon responds and I sweep into a wide, shallow turn.

No women or men have given me this feeling so fully as has the sky. I spiral down above the land and desire this to last forever. Gravity is the enemy of my love. As well I remind myself that I am part of the pageant; that just as the balloons are now drifting eastward, engaged in their slow-motion behemoth race, so it's demanded of the flyers that all land at about the same time in a live simulation of wide-screen spectacle. The cameras whir. The broadcasts fan out from microwave towers. The spectators watch.

But I want to make it last.

And I realize, first shocked, then amused, how many minutes it's been since I've held Haley's image in my mind.

I wheel the Dragon around in a de-

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scending spiral, as silent and graceful as any gull. Catching up with the other Dragons, I hear the mutter of wind rippling the fabric ever closer to the wing's trailing edge. I recognize the proximity of a stall and moderate slightly the angle of the warperons.

There are times when I have thought of gently and irrevocably slipping into the tightest of spirals and hurling myself blackly through the heart of the air. I cannot count the times I have skirted that final edge. Always I've refrained.

The air touches my cheekbones with the soft, tickling touch of Haley's cloudy hair.

There are times....

Death in triplicate stands by my elbow at the bar. Three tall shapes in black hooded robes have stepped to the brass rail. Skull faces, obviously sculpted with care, grin from cowled shadows. They say nothing. The trio reminds me of participants in a Mexican holy day parade.

Two deaths stare around the crowded Trope. The other looks at me. With my beer, I toast it back silently.

"Hey! You people want anything?" The barman tonight is one of the Trope's owners. With the Dragon Festival now started, all possible personnel are needed to service the crowds.

Three bony grins turn to smile at him. There are no words.

After a pause the owner says, "Listen, this is for paying customers. You want something?"

Three shrouded figures lean across the bar toward him. The owner draws back. "Drink," he says, "or get out."

Dead silence.

He apparently decides he's outnumbered. "Shit," the owner mutters and goes off to wait on newcomers at the end of the bar. I think I hear a giggle from the death figure furthest from me. The nearest turns again to face me. Again I raise a glass in toast.

The figure reaches, hand ivory with make-up, into a pocket beneath the robes and withdraws an object. Then it extends the hand toward me. I accept a small skull made of spun sugar, another relic of Mexican religious celebrations. I incline my head gravely and set the candy skull beside my glass.

The nearest figure turns back to its fellows. I hear a whispered consultation. Then all three leave the bar together. As they reach the door, the barman shouts, "Good goddamn riddance!" He walks past me on the way to the cash register and I hear him say in a lower voice, "Give me the creeps."

"Friends of yours?"

I turn to face Haley and Lark. I hadn't seen them coming. "Friends of ours." I shrug.

"Spooky," says Haley.

"Striking masks," says Lark.

"Want a beer?"

"We're already set," says Lark. "We've got a table behind the rubber plants. Do you want to join us?"

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I toss down the final swallow of beer. "Thanks, no. Not yet. I'm going to get some fresh air before I do any more drinking. You want to come along?"

Lark shakes his head. "We've got to do some drinking before we get some more fresh air."

"Then I'll see you both later. I need the air." I pick up the spun-sugar skull and gnaw on the jaw region as I push through the crowd.

Outside it's warmer than it was last night. There is cloud cover; I suspect the San Juans will be solidly snow-capped by morning. I zip the front of my flight jacket and stick my balled fists into the pockets. Turning right, I head along Main toward the landing meadow. I see the amber lights of trucks still bringing in and unloading the deflated forms of the racing balloons. I heard earlier that Robert Simms and *Negwenya* won. I decide that's a good omen.

"Girl? Hey, stop a moment, girl."

I turn and look toward the source of the voice. I'm in front of the Teller House, the town's lone real department store. I look into the display window and see the life-sized image of an elderly ragged woman staring back at me. It's an argee screen — the name comes from the initials of the people who started setting up these synchronous video arrangements back in the late seventies. One enormous complex of electronic art, the argee screens are spotted in cities and towns around the globe. Each screen shows a live, life-sized, simultaneous transmission of a street scene somewhere else in the world. Sound and video equipment beam my voice and image back to the linked screen. A computer randomly changes the linkages.

Right now the old woman sees and hears me. I see and hear her. I have no idea where she really is. The scene behind her is dark and obviously urban. It could be any night-time city.

"I'm in Baltimore," she says. "Where are you?"

I tell her.

"Oh, yeah," she says. "I heard about you people. Saw you on the news. Bunch of fools who jump off cliffs on kites."

I laugh. "Condors launch from cliffs."

"Birds aren't too smart."

"But they fly."

"Yeah." She inspects me seriously. "You one of them?"

"Do I fly?" I nod. "Not exactly on a kite, though."

Her voice is thirsty. "Tell me about it."

For some reason I cannot ignore the imperative in her voice. I tell her about flying. I describe my Dragon Five as the combination of a high-winged monoplane and a bat. I talk of tomorrow's competition. I paint with words the colors of the long, gliding dragon kite I will tow behind my Five. I tell her of the *manjha*, the razor-sharp cutting line with which I will attempt

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to sever the tow-line of my opponent's kite. And with which he or she will try to sever mine. But most of all, I describe the flying. I talk religiously of fighting maneuvers in the sky.

And when I pause for breath, she says, "Girl, God bless you." Her image flickers.

The argee screen re-links. I blink a moment at the light. I see a daylight scene under bright sun. In the background is something that looks vaguely like the Taj Mahal. A man in a white linen suit looks out of the screen at me. He inspects me and stares at the colors of my jacket. Slowly he nods his head as though comprehending something. He says, *"Woh kata hai?"*

I smile, spread my hands helplessly, and walk on.

Woh kata hai. I believe that's an Indian kite fighter's challenge.

Dreaming.

It's called a *pench* and I love it more than either soccer or skiing. Each of us stands in a circle about three yards in diameter; the circles are approximately twenty feet apart. The officials have limed the circles on the grass as they would stripe the yard lines for a football game. The breeze is light this morning, but it may kick up. I have brought several different sizes of fighting kites. When I look around at my competition, I generally have to tilt my head back. I am eleven years old.

My gear litters the close-cropped grass around my feet: kites, extra lines, a spare spool. My little brother, eight, sits boredly reading a science fiction paperback just inside my circle. If I need it, he'll help with the launching.

I love Saturday mornings in general, but this particular one is the Michael Collins Annual Kite Fly. It's the second Saturday in September, and it delights everyone except the high school football coach, who wanted to use this field for a practice scrimmage. Luckily the principal has an autographed picture of the Apollo 11 crew and is an old kite fighter himself, so that was that.

The kite-fighting contest isn't the only event today, but it's the only one that interests me. The *pench* should start in a few minutes, at nine, and will continue until noon. Since I've got some sort of reputation, I'm one of the flyers who gets to start. Anyone who wants can take a turn standing in the opponent circle. If he loses, someone else takes his place. And if I lose, I'm out. Then I get to stand in line, waiting to challenge the current champions. I don't plan to spend a lot of time waiting in line.

This is an average Indian summer morning. It's cool now, but I'm guessing it's going to get very hot by midday. The nearest referee — Mr. Schindler, the junior high shop teacher — tells us through his bullhorn that each contestant should be ready. My first opponent steps into the next circle. I don't know his last name, but his

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first name is Ken and he's really sure of himself. I tell him I wish him luck. Ken snickers. He's in at least eighth grade.

"You want help launching?" says my little brother.

"I can do the first one myself." I adjust the bridle on a middle-sized kite. The breeze is gentle but steady.

"Okay." His attention returns to his Robert Heinlein novel.

Ken's kite looks fourteen inches by a foot — too small. He's overestimating the wind velocity. Too bad.

"Launch 'em," says the referee.

I lightly throw my gold-and-black fighter into the air and pump the cotton string with right hand: pull in, let out, pull in, let out, until the diamond-shaped kite gains lift in the breeze and begins to climb. I sneak a glance at Ken. His fighter autumn-leafs into the ground. I catch his eye and smile. He glares before picking up his kite to launch again.

My kite is solidly airborne. I continue the rhythm of launch; now the pumping motions are longer, smoother, slower. With one handle of the spool anchored at my feet, I stand at an angle to the nine-pound control line. String sings between thumb and forefinger of my left hand at shoulder level. I brake with right hand at right hip. My fighting kite soars. My mind goes with it and, for a moment, I look down at the field and see myself distantly below. I recognize me because of the colors of my jacket.

Ken has finally launched his kite and is trying to gain altitude with brute force rather than subtlety. I pay out another hundred feet of line and feel the knot that signals I'm at the pre-agreed altitude. I practice wind-current turns with my kite and look bored. I know Ken's looking at me, but I studiously ignore him.

"Okay," says the referee. "You both got the altitude? Go to it."

The strategy is fairly simple. Each of us has a flying line of five hundred feet. Then there's one hundred feet of cutting line between that and the kite. The cutting line is *manjha*, ordinary four-stranded string coated with a mixture of egg, starch, and powdered glass. I mixed mine myself. The rules allow us to double-coat the line so that when it's dry it can slice an opponent's line either from above or below. The winner of the competition is the flyer who has cut loose the greatest number of opponents' kites.

Ken opens the battle ferociously and heavy-handedly, diving his fighter at cross-angles to my string. I dive mine to compensate and am slightly faster. Ken cancels the tactic. That's a mistake too. I see his kite lurch sluggishly for just a moment. I pay out line and let my string rise into his. My index finger detects the slight vibration as the lines touch. I pull in and my fighter rises, tugging the cutting line against Ken's. His kite, severed, spins down with the wind while he reels in loose string. He does not look happy as

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my next competitor steps up to replace him.

"Good flight," says my little brother, and I'm not sure whether he's being sarcastic to Ken or to me.

My new opponent is a girl in the seventh grade who has just taken up fighting. She has promise, but very little experience. Her kite doesn't fly long after reaching fighting altitude.

It keeps going like that. In the first hour, I destroy five opponents. Next hour, six more. I let the competition keep their defeated kites if they can find them. Where would I store them all in my room?

Each hour we're allowed fifteen minutes out of competition. I use my time to change lines on my kite. Every time I cut someone else's line, my string loses some of its abrasive. I also adjust the bridle angle because the breeze continues to pick up.

The third and final hour gives me some better competition, but no one all that challenging. Not until Lark steps into the circle. He's even smaller than I am, but he's really tough. He's my age. We've grown up in the same small town and gone to school together from the first grade. We both started flying kites about the same time. Lark is the only one whose fighting ability I respect.

He nods to me and smiles, but says nothing as he launches his fighter. Even my little brother is interested in this contest. So he puts his paperback down for the while. "Mairin hasn't lost yet," he says to Lark.

"I'd hate to spoil her morning," Lark says, "but I'm feeling pretty good."

His kite soars on the late morning heat. Lark's fighter is brown with bright yellow bird-wings inset. "Okay," says Mr. Schindler, the referee. "This is the last one. It's almost noon."

At first Lark fights conservatively, not actively countering my spectacular strategies. The trouble is that my kite is all color. I dive on him like a falcon, swoop up from beneath, twirl my fighter across his like the blade of a buzz saw. Nothing happens. I know that much of the abrasive has been scraped from my cutting line by the seven competitions of the past hour. But I'm sure that at least a few feet of cutting edge remain on the line. It's a matter of finding.

"Hey," says Mr. Schindler. "I want to go to lunch."

Lark makes his move. His brown and yellow fighter crosses the angle of my own string, then drops. My index finger feels the slight vibration as his line touches mine. Lark starts rolling his kite sideways. I compensate by letting out more string and somehow neither line cuts. What does happen, though, each of us discovers simultaneously through fingertips. Our lines have become entangled. Lark's expression is grim.

"Don't worry," I call. I pay out more string as I simultaneously give

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the line a series of small tugs. Instead of rotating my kite so as to unwind our lines, I rotate to wrap them tighter. Then I pull.

I cut Lark's string and capture his kite because the upper line is still entwined with mine, all at the same time.

"Mairin!" He sounds furious. My eyes are on the two fighters.

"What?"

His voice moderates as I begin to reel in the kites. "It was a good contest."

I'll keep his kite in my room. For now, I lower my gaze to him and say, "Yes, it was very good." Unaccountably I want to run across to his circle and hug him. I would like to kiss him.

Hug Lark? Kiss him? I sit upright suddenly, supported on my elbows, and stare confusedly at the curtained light. My room in the Ionic Hotel takes on a dawn reality. I glance to the side. Beside me, a humped form snores beneath the comforter. It's not Lark; I know that.

Lark? I didn't grow up with him; we come from opposite sides of the continent. We did not match our kites in childhood. My disorientation causes me to touch my face gently with my fingers to see if I am still who I think I am.

I try to recapture something of the dream. There is an elusive truth I'm missing.

Skyfighters.

We spend our lives riding the thermals, those great columns of heated air that lend lift to our machines and spirits. The thermals rise because they are warmer than the surrounding air. We look for the clues and seek them out, using them as elevators to the sky.

The best thermals generate in this valley from mid to late afternoon. Since there are two competitors remaining in the Dragon Festival contests, that time has been reserved for them. The sun has begun its descent into the open western end of the valley, and the colors are, as always, spectacular. Crimson tongues lick through the cumulus.

Lark is one competitor; I am the other. All but us have seen our towed dragon kites spin down the long drop into mountainside, forest, or town, where the children vie to find the many-colored dragons and rip them to shreds.

Our duel will climax the festival.

Negwenya and *Cheshire* are waiting to ferry us both to a minimal fighting altitude. Then we will ride the thermals. Today Haley walks with me across the staging meadow.

"You do talk in your sleep, you know," Haley says. "Do you know that?" Without an answer, she continues: "Some of the time the words are clear. Sometimes you simply make sounds and your body moves. You're a restless sleeper. I slept like a lizard on a hot rock." She laughs. "Did you notice?"

I nod.

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Her expression turns serious. "I know last night was important to you — at least it was before last night." Her smile is indecipherable. "Now isn't the time to ask you things, I suppose." She hesitates, and her grip tightens in mine. "People don't work well as goals for you. That's my game." Now I see sadness in her face. "You love the sky more."

We have reached *Negwenya*. Robert Simms waits with his assistants by my Dragon V. Haley enfolds me in her arms and kisses me a long time on the lips. "Fly well," she whispers, then turns and walks across the field toward *Cheshire*.

I realize I'm crying, and I'm not sure yet why.

"Time to link up," says Robert, and his harsh, rope-scarred voice sounds to me softer than usual. I fasten myself into the harness of the Dragon V. I check to make sure the bridle of my fighting kite is securely fastened to the winch-post projecting downward from the Five's keel tube, just behind the point to which my legs extend. The fighting kite is a long, serpentine dragon of mylar, painted in my colors. It has the oval face and trailing, snake-like body characteristic of dragon kites. The only differences are the additional lifting surfaces and stabilizing fins.

The flight is ready to begin. I look across to *Cheshire*. Lark gives me a thumbs-up sign and Haley waves. At *Negwenya*, Robert offers me a brilliant smile and his ritual. "Break a leg, lady." And we launch.

At twelve thousand feet, *Negwenya* floats almost directly above the immense tailings pond of the moribund Pandora Mine. The bright white tailings heap looks like some malignant thing beached between creek and trees. I think of kids singing their technological jingles when the wind rises and sifts white dust from the tailings down across the town: "Hexa, hexa, hexavalent chromium!"

I notice that the aspen on the steep sides of the valley are starting to turn prematurely. Great slashes of golden yellow have suddenly appeared within twenty-four hours. No aspen is an island. The root systems of groves are interconnected. When the chlorophyll breaks down in one tree's leaves in the autumn, so goes its extended family.

I had seen broken cumulus above the valley when I linked up to *Negwenya*. Scattered puffy formations are the giveaway signs of thermals, since condensation forms atop the pillars of warm air. The problem is that clouds move with the wind and usually only indicate where the thermals *were*. Extrapolation and a few good guesses should gain my ride up.

At twelve-five, I release the pressure catches, and the Five drops away from *Negwenya*. I crane my neck and see that Lark has also dropped. In terms of radiated heat, both of us are more likely to find thermals over the

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tailings pond or the rooftops of town than above the darker fields or forest. Lark seems to be making for the pond. I stretch my body, feel the muscles loosen, and wheel my Dragon toward the center of town.

The scarlet sunset momentarily dazzles my eyes. I guessed correctly. I feel the left wing rise slightly, indicating I am skirting a thermal. I bring the nose down and turn into it; then feel the mild confirming bump that I am all the way in. Now what I have to do is stay inside the current in a gentle ascending spiral until I've reached the prearranged altitude. In this case, that is fifteen thousand feet. Neither Lark nor I want to try for altitude records today, though Kite pilots here have gone above eighteen thousand without oxygen.

Up, up, and the readout on my visor lists off the numbers. As I rise in the thermal column, I touch the button on my control bar that unreels the line tethering my fighter. The black and gold dragon shape drops below and behind my Five. The lift ratio of the kite with its fins is excellent. So it takes only a few moments before it is gliding behind the Dragon. I pay out the entire hundred feet of line. Dragon follows Dragon like an offspring trailing the parent.

I am allowed fifty feet, half the tether, to be cutting line. But where the abrasive lengths are placed and, indeed, *what* lengths are made abrasive, are up to me. Equipment officials carefully checked before launch to ensure that no more than fifty percent of the dragon's tow-line is a cutting surface. Like shagreen, the surface cuts only in one direction.

As I swing back across the town, I see that Lark is ascending above the tailings pond. I see his Dragon followed by the brown and yellow fledgling that is his fighter.

At fifteen thousand feet, the air is thin and painfully crisp. The sunlight feels like it's striking my eyes with sharp edges until I polarize my visor. Now that it's time to leave the thermal, I exit on the upwind side to minimize altitude loss in the cooler surrounding air.

Lark and I stalk each other like soaring birds. These Dragons are not the Indian fighting kites of childhood. There are no sudden moves — or rarely. Maneuvers tend to be graceful and conservative, to minimize loss of altitude.

We sweep by each other in a wide pass and I estimate I'm about one hundred feet higher than Lark. From one point of view, we might seem to be tracing arabesques across the sky. From a more realistic referent, we circle each other like hungry, cautious predators.

Lark loops back in a figure-eight and sails along still below, but parallel to me. I assume he is offering bait and try to guess how many moves ahead he's thinking. My craft and I are slightly heavier than he and his; my sink rate is

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higher and so I'm gradually descending to his altitude. I'm in a position to wing over and pounce, but that's the expectable thing. Lark doesn't expect me to do the expected; so I do it.

I hit the warperons hard; the ends of my wings deform and peel me into a steep, descending bank. I'm losing vertical advantage fast, but my Dragon is cutting down hard behind Lark's tail. It should have been an easy victory except that Lark reacts as though anticipating me — and I have the bemused thought that he probably was. The brown and yellow Dragon matches me move for move. If he's not duplicating the exact angle of bank and degree of dive, I can't tell the difference.

Damn it! Frustration moderates my caution as I slam the Dragon into a reverse-angle bank. Stabilized fabric crackles like firecrackers; the aluminum skeleton groans.

Lark predicted that one too. I know the long lenses on the ground are taking all this in. I hope the viewers are enjoying it.

The hell with this. I tighten my downward spiral, knowing that sooner or later I'll suck him out of the tactic. Either that or we'll hit the ground together.

Anyone else would have pulled out of this falling moth spiral in some sort of sane maneuver that should have allowed me to use the slim remaining margin of altitude and cross their fighter's tether with my cutting line. At times I must remind myself that Lark is no saner than I. One moment I'm aware that I'm still sinking closer to Lark and in a relatively short time am going to be right on top of him. The next moment Lark reverses the pitch of his spiral in an aching, crushing maneuver that neither rips off his wings nor puts him into a stall. I see brown fabric rush past my right eye, so close that I recoil slightly. *Jesus!* One track of my mind wonders how close his cutting line came to severing my wing — or my head.

I don't know what he's planning, but I won't equal his suicide maneuver. As I level off less precipitously, I see Lark to my right, apparently fleeing. I look beyond his Dragon and know this is not an abdication of the field. Lark is making for what appears to be a great funnel of birds soaring upward. They're in a thermal.

Rather than seek out my own thermal, I pursue Lark, hoping to catch him before he reaches the elevator. The epinephrine surge from Lark's spectacular maneuver starts to abate, leaving tinglings in my chest and hands. I will the Dragon to fly faster; other than that I can do nothing but let the craft sail serenely along. I enjoy the silence. I remember the network coverage of a previous Dragon tourney in which, as a novelty, audio technicians had dubbed in the wasp-buzz sounds of old piston-engined fighter planes. It was amusing at first, but ultimately offensive.

I am close to Lark, but not close

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enough as he enters the thermal and begins his ascent. I glance at my altimeter readout: ten-seven. That means we were about a thousand feet above the town when Lark pulled out of the sprial. I trust all the groundlings were suitably thrilled. At a thousand feet, people truly *do* look like ants.

The gentle bump of entering the warmer air rocks the Dragon's nose, and I start to follow Lark vertically. As I go into the ascending bank, I sneak a look behind and see that my black and gold fighter is still trailing. Good. It hasn't occurred to me in these past minutes to check. It's an article of faith that I won't lose the dragon kite through mechanical accident or chance.

Again because he's lighter, Lark rises faster in the thermal than I. I resign myself fatalistically to the ride up and start to think like a tourist. I never, *never* think like a tourist. But now I look at the aspen, or I stare down at the checkerboard town, or I think about the act of flight rather than feeling it. Or something.

Something!

I look up and stare and react — try to do all those things at once. Lark hasn't done as I anticipated. He has not waited until achieving the fighting altitude. No need — no rule that says he must. Instead he stoops upon me like a hawk at prey.

His Dragon grows in my vision. I watch. I know I must choose a maneuver, but something else bids me wait. By now I should be reacting unconsciously. If my consciousness is at work, it's now too late. There are several possible defensive maneuvers. So far today, Lark has correctly anticipated my every movement.

—large, so large. Brown and—

I must choose, I must — I do nothing.

That is my choice.

Lark does not anticipate it. Our vectors merge. His Dragon slams into mine with a force I could probably calculate, except — except I cannot think. I don't know if I'm hurt or if I'm in shock. I feel nothing. I simply know a buffeting like a great wind has seized us. I realize we are flying a ragged craft composited of bits and pieces of our two Dragons: snapped, flailing wires, twisted tubing, rent fabric. Lark hangs in his harness only a few feet from me, but he doesn't look.

My vision skips like the frames in a badly spliced film. I see the golden aspen and the town spread out in the valley below us. I see Lark start to raise his head. Blood covers one side of his face. Droplets fly backward from his head like a fan.

I see the truth in that scarlet spray.

It is a long moment suspended in time.

Then it falls.

We fall — as bits of shattered Dragon spin away from us like colored confetti. I try to reach out toward Lark, but I can move only one arm. He stares back at me and I think he's alive.

(to page 160)

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Letters

Ellison, Sheffield and mixed bag

Once again, another good issue. The Harlan Ellison piece was well written and, though it was not SF, it showed a new facet to a fine writer — which is always very welcome. Mr. Ellison is indeed one of my favorite writers in the field or out and "All the Lies..." was appreciated I can assure you. Kent Bash is totally new to me, but his cover art was excellent. It was probably the best cover F&SF has sported in some while. I'd love to have been there when Mr. Ellison posed for *that* painting!

Interestingly enough, I'd have to give top story honors not to the above mentioned Ellison, but to Charles Sheffield's wonderful "Marriage of True Minds." It was pure good rollicking fun — and from an unexpected source. Who says SF writers aren't versatile? Very well done....

The rest of the line up? Well, it was rather a mixed bag. "Report From The Snith Digest" seemed to belong more in Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine than F&SF. "The Visible Partner" was a good idea used only competently. "The Fugue" was *much* too vague for me. "Rheeman's Space" went unfinished unfortunately. "An Unfortunate Incident..." was well written but skirted familiar over-population stories. Finally, "Lord of The Dance" was enjoyable enough to take third position for the issue.

Overall an average entry — which means good to this reader.

I also enjoyed Malzberg's "Books" column. Good touch of nostalgia.

Tended to agree with Baird Searles's review of Kubrick's *version* of King's *The Shining*. I think that is the real problem with this film — it is Kubrick telling King's story. And not at all well. The film lost much when Stephen King chose to stay clear of its creation in my opinion. And, yes, it's a damn shame. And, yes, though I hate to make comparisons, it certainly never drew near the majestic heights of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I think it is fair to say that Kubrick structured the film (titled sequences, deliberate divisions between time periods, strong music [which I loved, by the way] etc.) to *be* the 2001 of the horror film genre. As a director Kubrick is definitely one of the best — but as a story teller (co-author of the screen play, I believe) he — pardon me — does not shine. Summed up: a beautifully filmed disappointment. But, God, that beginning sequence in which the camera swoops over *incredible* mountain country, music pumping away, and actually follows the car around turns ... an opening surely worthy of a much better film.

—Jason G. Hardy

Deep down, Kerch had a soft spot for Sylvia

Poor Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs ("All the Lies That Are My Life," November). Because his lawyer made an appalling, elementary mistake, his grieving friends have undoubtedly not seen the last of SylviatheCunt. In fact, she will get a substantial part of his estate, and Missy's ten thousand lawyers won't be able to stop her. Here's the sad story:

There were three witnesses to O.J.'s will, although California law requires only two. However, two of those three, Missy and Bran, were also bene-

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ficiaries under the will. A witness to a will cannot take anything under that will, so, in order to have two disinterested witnesses and, therefore, a valid will, the bequest to either Missy or Bran must be set aside. That bequest will then be distributed according to California's intestate succession law.

That law, briefly, provides that the estate of a person who dies without a will and without spouse, descendants, or parents surviving shall go to his siblings. O.J. was divorced, and the story didn't mention any children, parents, or siblings other than Sylvia. Assuming that Sylvia was his only surviving relative, she gets either the Kerch Corporation or O.J.'s house and grounds. The losing beneficiary can, of course, always sue Kenny Gross for malpractice.

—*Dan Whitlock*
Modesto, CA

More on Norden's "Curse"

Concerning Eric Norden's "The Curse of the Mhondoro Nkabele" (F&SF, Sept. 1980)....

Firstly, thank you for putting your note at the start of the story, rather than at the end, for in spite of that the work still chilled my blood, weakened my knees, set my teeth to chatter and made my literary sensibilities howl with terror. This is because, secondly, I rather like the present style and content of F&SF and find the tastes of the, hopefully fictional, O.T. Nkabele, Esq. somewhat ... well, words fail me, and just as well, for they would not be very polite words.

May good fortune attend your magazine, and should such an object as "Astrid of the Asteroids" ever appear in your mailtray, might I suggest the witch doctors of this part of the world, who are said to be very competent and would be glad to help for a reasonable fee.

—*Sean McMullen*
Melbourne, Australia

Where exactly can I reach these witch doctors? See letter that follows.

Dear Ed:

It's a hard, lonely business, this being a top professional in the field of science fiction, but the letter in the January issue which just reached me sent me to Eric Norden's THE CURSE OF MHONDORO NKABELE which ran in the 9/80 F&SF.

I was of course shocked to see myself and my collected works referred to as a "veritable pustulence on the face of the universe, a yellow dog barking in the night," but as I continued through the novelette and understood the compassion and sincerity underlying the remarks my anger faded and became akin to awe; I can understand Mhondoro Nkabele's anguish and he has, in a way, made it my own.

Ed, I am enclosing THE SLAVES OF SATURN, a new novelette which I hope will please you. Ed, are you really feeling better? The inexplicable nausea and faint chills of this endless cold I contracted in September make Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow a rather frightening prospect, I must tell you. Could you tell me about those headaches you had? Were they more or less in the forehead or were they like anvils behind the *eyes?*

Ed, I hope you'll like THE SLAVES OF SATURN. Could you give me a quick response and if favorable (I hope it is favorable) run it as soon as possible? Maybe in the April issue if you can squeeze in 18,000 words? I'll wait on the check; that's no problem. *You understand?*

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That drum you heard. Was it tympani or more like a heavy *snare*.

Hurriedly,
—Barry N. Malzberg

Wrong woman on cover

Thou greats of my favorite magazine, a grievous error has been made. Or rather your cover artist Ron Walotsky has sorely goofed in his rendering of the story "Menage Outré."

I was sitting at the table, waiting for something or another to cook, idly looking at the cover of your February issue, wondering which story the woman in white came from. Imagine my surprise when I finally flipped inside and found out! Let me quote page 7, paragraph 3:

> She stood tall and proud, like the aristocratic Maasai warriors of her ancestry, with skin like black velvet and hair cropped to a short skullcap.

That is not a description of the woman on the cover. It is not even close. Furthermore from the other descriptions in the story, the woman was not built like Mae West, but was rather more long and lean as befitting her Maasai ancestry. Tsk! Tsk! The artist *should* read the story.

Other than that, though I subscribe to every major sf magazine on the market (and some that aren't anymore), I look forward to reading yours more than any of the others — and am rarely disappointed. One thing I have found from a long term subscription to your magazine; I do not find much interest in the award (and best of) anthologies anymore. I usually have read so many of the stories already in F&SF that they aren't worth my money to purchase. Furthermore I appreciate being able, at long last, to peel off the *!@#%@ mailing stickers and see the covers. Now if only those product code squares could be gotten rid of!

—Laura Campbell
Davis, CA.

We did goof on this cover and spoke to Ron W. about the mistake. He apologizes and promises to stay away from women and paint only aliens and hardware for a full year.

(from page 157)

The sky, I try to tell him. At least we're in the sky. There could have been so many other ways. But the sky — Those who fly there are more important than any others.

Wind sucks the breath from my lungs. Lark, I try to say. Friend. I was wrong. I think Haley knows. Lovers. I should have—

I see green fields below.

Lark, it should have been us. We know the sky—

And the ground rises up like a fist.

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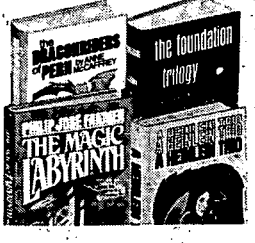

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